COMBAT AIRCRAFT 141

Richard R Burgess

F2H BANSHEE UNITS

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INTRODUCTION

On 23 August 1951, a division of McDonnell F2H Banshee jet fighters launched from the deck of the Essex-class aircraft carrier USS *Essex* (CV-9) for the aircraft's first combat mission over the Korean peninsula. The Banshees were being flown by the 'Blue Bolts' of the US Navy's Fighter Squadron (VF) 172, based on the US East Coast. The Banshee was sharing the skies with another type of carrier-based jet fighter, the Grumman F9F Panther, which had been in combat since the July 1950 US response to the 25 June North Korean invasion of South Korea.

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Two F2H-2s of VF-172 head for 'feet wet' following a mission over Korea. The 'Blue Bolts' introduced the Banshee to combat during the unit's deployment on board *Essex* in 1951–52. The tail code 'R' of CVG-17 was retained for the cruise despite the fact that the squadron was deployed with CVG-5, which was assigned the tail code 'S' (*Christopher P Cavas Collection*)

The arrival of the Banshee invited inevitable comparisons to the Panther. The two fighter types were contemporaries, a manifestation of the US Navy's cautious development of the relatively new technology of the jet engine, and especially the suitability of the jet for carrier operations. For the quarter-century following the end of World War 2, the US Navy developed several fighter types in parallel to ensure against failure that would leave the service without sound designs. The first all-jet fighters to see operational service were the North American FJ-1 and the McDonnell FH-1 Phantom, both of which served for a very limited duration.

The F9F and the F2H were the next manifestation of the jet day fighter in carrier air groups (CVGs). At the beginning of the Korean War, a straight-deck Essex-class carrier typically embarked a CVG with two jet day fighter squadrons with F9Fs or F2Hs, or one squadron of each; two day fighter squadrons with F4U Corsairs; one attack squadron with AD Skyraiders; and specialised detachments from composite squadrons which fielded night-attack AD-3Ns/4Ns, nightfighter F4U-5Ns, electronic warfare AD-2Qs/3Qs/4Qs, early warning AD-3Ws/4Ws and photo-reconnaissance F9F-2Ps, the latter having succeeded piston-engined F4U-5P aircraft. In order to ease the operational pressure on jet-equipped units, and allow the creation of a handful of provisional air task groups, some carriers deployed with only four core squadrons.

During the Korean conflict, the main strategic focus of the US military in the Cold War was the Soviet threat, particularly to Western Europe. This meant that the three Midway-class carriers – the largest vessels of their type in the US Navy – were kept in the Atlantic Fleet due to their ability to launch North American AJ Savage nuclear-capable bombers. Initially, Atlantic Fleet fighter squadrons also operated the bulk of the F4U-5 and F2H-2 fighters, while Pacific Fleet units flew most of the F9Fs and F4U-4s. As the Korean War progressed, a handful of Atlantic Fleet carriers and carrier air groups were despatched to the Korean theater. Some of these vessels had Banshees embarked.

As will be shown, the F2H-2 Banshee had some performance advantages over the F9F-2/5 Panther, and the F2H-2P would outshine and eventually replace the F9F-2P in the fleet. The F2H-2 would also be modified into the US Navy's first nuclear-strike tactical jet, and also into its first truly carrier-suitable nightfighter jet (the F3D was the first but proved less suitable for carrier operations). This versatility was developed into the F2H-3/4 versions, which standardised one of the jet fighter squadrons of a CVG into a radar-equipped all-weather fighter unit, 'all-weather' being a term which replaced nightfighter. That concept would continue in the 1950s and into the 1960s, with at least one VF squadron in each CVG being equipped with an all-weather aircraft, such as the F4D Skyray or the F3H Demon.

F2H-2s assigned to VF-12 fly over *Coral Sea* during the carrier's Mediterranean cruise in 1951. This unit would undertake four deployments with the F2H-2 between March 1951 and July 1955, all as part of CVG-1. Three of these deployments were to the Mediterranean, and the fourth, and last, was a world cruise embarked in *Midway* (*Peter Davies Collection*)

The Banshee would be the last straight-wing jet fighter in the fleet. Its success is partially reflected in the fact that it outlasted the F9F-2/5 Panther, F9F-6/7/8 Cougar and F7U Cutlass in frontline service on carriers. For aerial combat, the Banshee was a pure gunfighter for most of its career, although it was fitted with Sidewinder air-to-air missiles in 1958 toward the end of its fleet career. Sidewinders also armed the Banshees of the Royal Canadian Navy squadrons, the only foreign operator of the jet.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the assistance of aviation historians who generously shared their collections and research in an era when the COVID-19 pandemic hampered hands-on research into archives. A special thanks to Lt Cdr Richard J Morgan (US Navy), whose database of carrier air group composition and deployments and broad understanding of US Naval Aviation of the 1950s greatly facilitated research on F2H operations and force structure.

Thanks also to the historians and archivists of the Navy History and Heritage Command, who posted the Korean War carrier and carrier air group deployment reports on its website and who update the *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships*. Thanks to Steve Ginter of Ginter Books, fellow Osprey authors Peter Davies and Peter Mersky, Terry Panopalis, Patrick Martin, Cdr Doug Siegfried (US Navy) and Mark Aldrich of the

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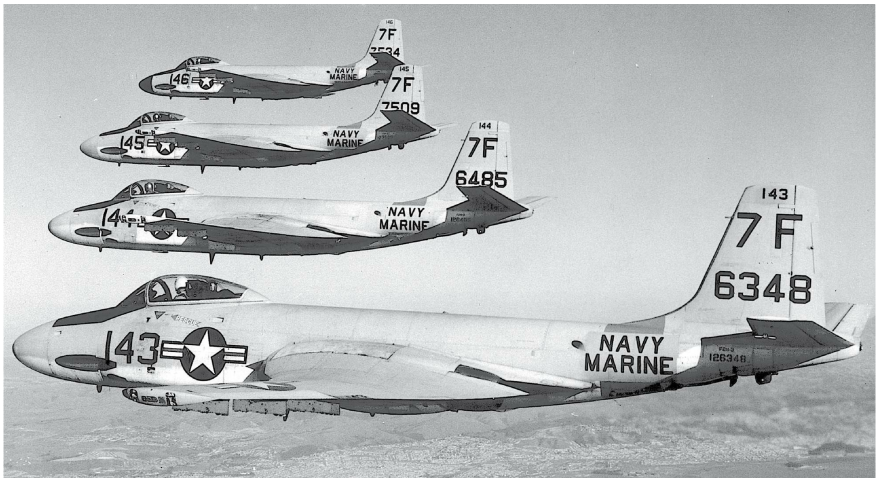
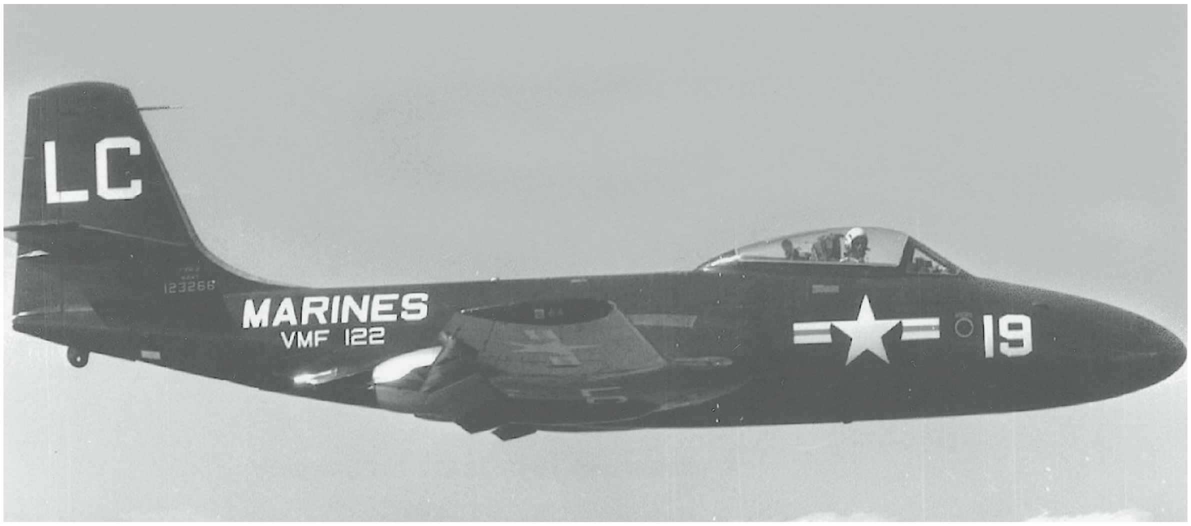


Four F2H-3s assigned to NARTU Oakland fly in formation over San Francisco Bay in early 1961, just weeks before their retirement in March of that year. The unit provided training for two reserve squadrons, VF-876 and VF-879, and it was the US Navy's last operator of the Banshee (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

CHAPTER ONE

FIRST GENERATION JETS

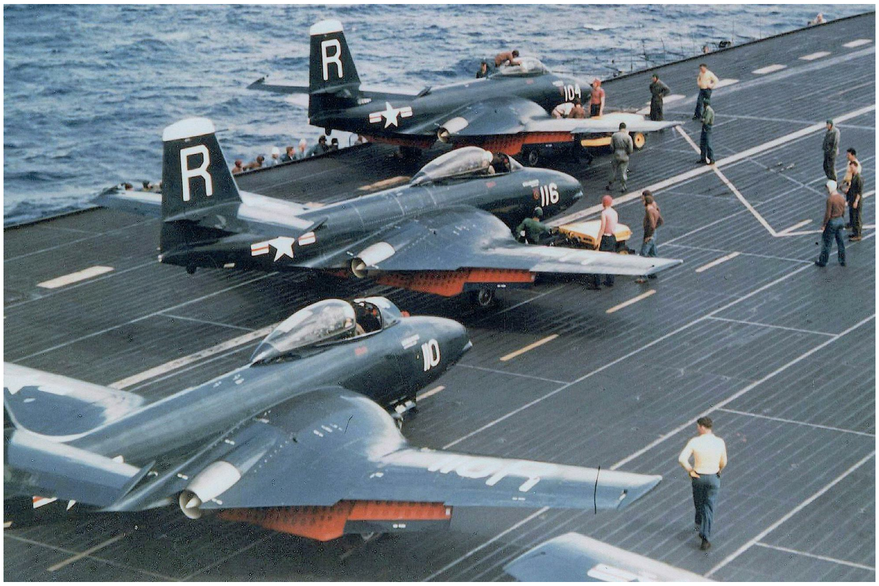
The Banshee's story began with its McDonnell predecessor, the FH-1 (previously FD-1) Phantom, which was the US Navy's first operational carrier-based jet fighter. The Phantom was a single-seat, twin-engined design with visually obvious pedigree to the Banshee that succeeded it. The aircraft originated from a US Navy Bureau of Aeronautics request in 1942 to McDonnell Aircraft Corporation for a carrier-based jet fighter. McDonnell was selected in part because the major aircraft companies of the day were heavily engaged in wartime production of piston-engined fighters like the F6F Hellcat and F4U Corsair.



VMF-122 F2H-2 BuNo 123266 in flight. VMF-122 was not only the first US Marine Corps squadron to be equipped with the Banshee, it was also the first to deploy with the aircraft on board a carrier – it was assigned to CVG-4 embarked in *Oriskany* for the vessel's Mediterranean cruise of 1951. VMF-122 had flown FH-1 Phantoms and F2H-1s prior to upgrading to the F2H-2 (*Peter Davies Collection*)

McDonnell submitted the Phantom design in January 1943, and within a week had an order from the US Navy for one prototype. The design reflected the influence of the company's XP-67 Moonbat twin piston-engined fighter. The initial straight-wing layout of the FD-1 included six wing-mounted engines of notional size, but the eventual design settled on two larger engines installed in the wing-root fillets to maximise fuel capacity in the fuselage and to facilitate the wing-fold. The pilot sat forward of the wing's leading edge, and the armament of four 0.50-cal machine guns was installed in the upper half of the nose.

Construction of the XFD-1 proceeded well, but the initial flight was hampered by delays in delivery of the Westinghouse WE-19XB-2B engines. The XFD-1 prototype, with only one engine installed, achieved flight for the first time on 2 January 1945 during a brief hop over the runway at Lambert Field in St Louis, Missouri. The second engine was installed shortly thereafter and the test programme began in earnest on 26 January. Although flight-testing was subsequently delayed by engine and aerodynamic problems and a fatal mishap, the aircraft proved its carrier suitability during trials on 19 July 1946 on board USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVB-42), when Lt Cdr James Davidson made the US Navy's first pure jet carrier takeoffs and landings. This was fortuitous for manufacturer and customer alike, as the Phantom had been ordered into production some 16 months earlier, on 7 March 1945.



F2H-1s assigned to VF-171 line up for launch from a Midway-class aircraft carrier in an undated photograph. VF-171 was the first fleet Banshee squadron and, along with sister squadron VF-172, took the jet on its first deployment, from 9 September 1950 to the Mediterranean Sea with CVG-17 on board *Coral Sea*. Note the F2H-1's lack of provision for tip tanks (*Peter Davies Collection*)

The FH-1 (as the Phantom was re-designated when the 'D' manufacturer designation was returned to Douglas designs) featured a slightly longer fuselage, an enlarged vertical stabiliser and a greater fuel capacity provided by a conformal ventral tank. The first production FH-1 was delivered in January 1947, and McDonnell completed deliveries of 60 aircraft to the US Navy and US Marine Corps in May 1948.

The first fleet squadron to receive the FH-1 was VF-17A, which gave up its F8F Bearcats and duly became the world's first operational carrier-based jet fighter squadron. On 1 May 1948, the squadron's 16 Phantoms were craned on board USS *Saipan* (CVL-48) for extensive carrier qualifications, including deck launches and catapult shots. After 200 landings without incident, the squadron debarked on 3 May, although one Phantom was lost during a mid-air collision during recovery at Naval Air Station (NAS) Quonset Point, Rhode Island.

Records are unclear as to whether the FH-1 made any substantial deployments during its short career, although one source states that VF-17A 'Phantom Fighters' (later re-designated VF-171 on 11 August 1948) embarked in USS *Coral Sea* (CVB-41) with CVAG-17 from 7 June through to 11 August 1948, during which time the carrier sailed in the South Atlantic and the Mediterranean. VF-171 deployed again with CVG-17 (re-designated from CVAG-17 on 1 September 1948) on board USS *Midway* (CVB-41) to the Mediterranean from 4 January to 5 March 1949.

VF-1L – later part of Air Development Squadron Three (VX-3) – and VF-172 also received the FH-1, as did Marine Fighter Squadron (VMF) 122. After its brief fleet service, the Phantom served in the Naval Air Reserve for jet introduction training until July 1953.

ENTER THE BANSHEE

In the accelerating competition between the first generation of jet fighters, the FH-1 Phantom lagged behind from the start. McDonnell responded to a US Navy Bureau of Aeronautics request for a successor design to the aircraft, and on 2 March 1945 it requested that the company develop and build three XF2D-1s (later XF2H-1s).

The XF2H-1 was powered by two Westinghouse J34-WE-22 turbojets each generating 3000 lbs of thrust. The lengthened fuselage allowed room for more fuel than the FH-1. The nose was redesigned to house four 20 mm M3 cannon firing from its underside to avoid flash-blinding the pilot. The XF2H-1 first flew from Lambert Field on 11 January 1947, with company test pilot Robert M Eldholm at the controls. The aircraft's flight test programme and carrier trials were successful, but some improvements were needed. These were duly incorporated into the first Banshee production model, the F2H-1.

The F2H-1 differed from the XF2H-1 in that it featured a slightly longer fuselage to allow greater internal fuel tankage and the elimination of dihedral in the horizontal stabiliser. The wing was thinner, with less of a dihedral than the XF2H-1. No tip tanks could be installed, but internal tankage allowed for a 600-mile-radius mission. No external stores could be carried. Ejection seats were installed on the F2H-1 after the tenth production aircraft – in August 1949, the Banshee had the distinction of being the first aircraft from which a pilot had to make an emergency ejection. The engines were later replaced by J34-WE-30s, which each produced 3150 lbs of thrust.

The first F2H-1 was bailed by the US Navy to McDonnell and used to test afterburners developed for the company's XF-88A and an extended trailing edge for the wing under development for the F2H-3.

On 29 May 1947, the US Navy ordered 56 F2H-1s, which McDonnell delivered in the Bureau Number (BuNo) blocks 122530-122539 and 122990-123015. In August 1948, the company delivered the fleet's first F2H-1s to Air Development Squadron (VX) 3 at NAS Atlantic City, New Jersey, for a service evaluation. The Banshees replaced the FH-1 Phantoms in VF-171 (which became the 'Aces') at Naval Auxiliary Air Station (NAAS) Cecil Field, Florida, in March 1949, and led to the transfer to reserve units of the rest of the fleet's FH-1s.

The Banshee entered service at a time critical to the future of carrier aviation. The USAF, fielding the Convair B-36 Peacemaker long-range bomber, challenged the need for aircraft carriers in the nation's arsenal by claiming that its new strategic bomber could fly higher than contemporary jet fighters and, therefore, could not be challenged by interceptors. The Secretary of Defense, Louis Johnson, subsequently cancelled development of the first supercarrier, USS *United States* (CVA-58). The Banshee was selected by concerned US Navy admirals to demonstrate the vulnerability of the B-36 and, in August 1949, a production example was flown to 52,000 ft. It set an unofficial altitude record for a jet as a result, and, crucially, exceeded the operational ceiling of the B-36.

F2H-2

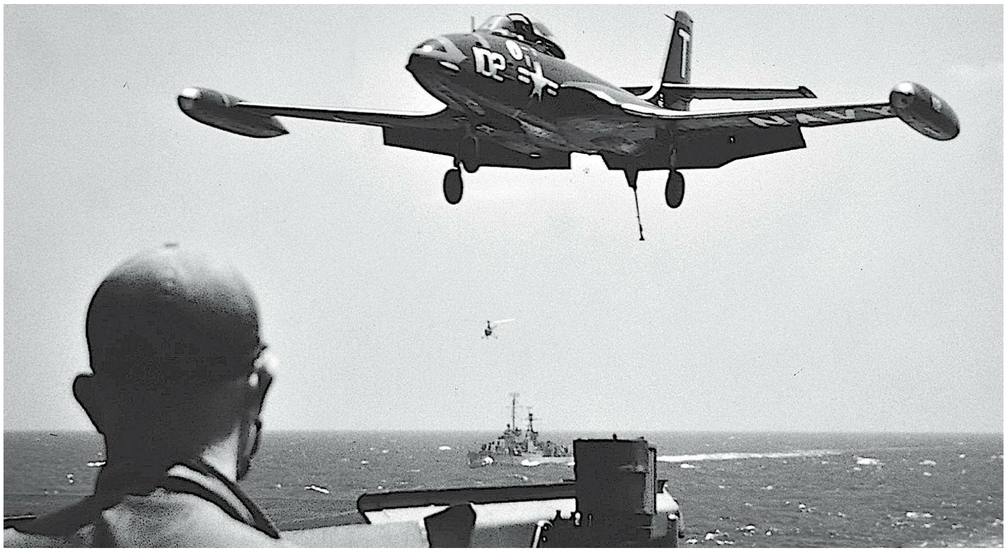
The F2H-1 had only a brief fleet career, for it was rapidly superseded by the F2H-2. The latter would have the largest production run of any Banshee version.

While the overall length of the F2H-2 was the same as the F2H-1, the fuselage forward of the wing was 14 inches longer on the former. The internal fuel load was also increased, the uprated J34-WE-34 engine replaced the -30 and a small, range-only fire-control radar was installed in the upper nose. The wingtips were modified with connections to accommodate a 200-gallon fuel tank affixed to each wingtip. Eight under-fuselage and wing racks were fitted to allow the Banshee to haul two 500-lb bombs or some combination of eight 250-lb bombs, or 5-in. High-Velocity Aircraft Rockets (HVARs) or Anti-Tank Aircraft Rockets (ATARs). The wing was strengthened to handle the increased load. These improvements came at a cost, as the F2H-2's performance suffered slightly compared to the F2H-1.

Production of the F2H-2 – which first flew on 18 August 1949 – would total 333 aircraft, including 27 that would be delivered as F2H-2Bs (see later). The F2H-2/2B BuNo blocks were 123204-123299, 123314-123382, 124940-124955, 124964-125071, 125500-125505 and 125649-125670. In 1949, deliveries of the F2H-2 proceeded to squadrons in the Atlantic Fleet (VF-171, VF-172 and VF-11), while Pacific Fleet squadrons received F9F Panthers, which were committed to the war in Korea from July 1950. Later, as Atlantic Fleet squadrons deployed to Task Force (TF) 77 off Korea, the "Banjo", as the Banshee had been affectionately nicknamed in the fleet, joined the fray.

While the F9F Panthers initially bore the jet fighter burden of the air war over Korea at the beginning of the conflict, Banshee squadrons made several deployments to the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean Sea before they would see service in the skies over Korea. The first F2H-2 fighter squadron deployments were to the US Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean Sea when VF-171 and VF-172 (the US Navy's first Banshee squadrons) embarked their jets in *Coral Sea* as part of CVG-17, the carrier departing its homeport of Norfolk, Virginia, on 9 September 1950 and returning from cruise on 1 February 1951.

VF-171 and VF-172 had begun work-ups for deployment in the Banshee in 1949. Both squadrons had previously flown the FH-1 Phantom, so the pilots and deck crews already had some familiarity with operating jets at sea after making two short cruises in the Caribbean Sea with the aircraft. VF-171 worked up on USS *Franklin D. Roosevelt* (CVB-42) in August 1949 and both squadrons briefly embarked in USS *Philippine Sea* (CV-47) in December.



A VF-171 Banshee approaches the flightdeck of *Coral Sea* in 1950 during the F2H-2's first deployment. The Banshee's early cruises were all made to the Mediterranean in support of NATO's southern flank. CVG-17 included both VF-171 and VF-172 within its ranks on this initial 1950–51 deployment (*US Navy*)

With the Korean War raging on the other side of the world, the first Banshee deployments were peaceful but still tense since the main focus of US forces at that time was the European area of operations. The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) had been formed in April 1949, and the carrier deployments to the Sixth Fleet were an important part of NATO's deterrence against Soviet aggression. As previously noted, the 'big deck' carriers of the time, the three Midway-class CVBs, remained assigned to the Atlantic Fleet for the duration of the Korean War.

Coral Sea also took the Banshee on its second deployment on 20 March 1951, this time with CVG-1 to the Mediterranean Sea with VF-11 'Red Rippers' and VF-12 'Flying Ubangis', both equipped with F2H-2s. They had previously been equipped with Grumman F8F Bearcats until May and August 1950, respectively, when the squadrons made the jet transition to Banshees (VF-11 had initially flown F2H-1s, soon followed by F2H-2s, while VF-12 upgraded directly to the F2H-2). *Coral Sea* returned home on 6 October 1951.

Coral Sea had been joined in the Mediterranean by USS *Oriskany* (CV-34), the second carrier to deploy with Banshee fighter squadrons – in this case VF-62 and VMF-122. VF-62 had also formerly flown F8Fs, and it had begun transitioning to the F2H-2 in August 1950.

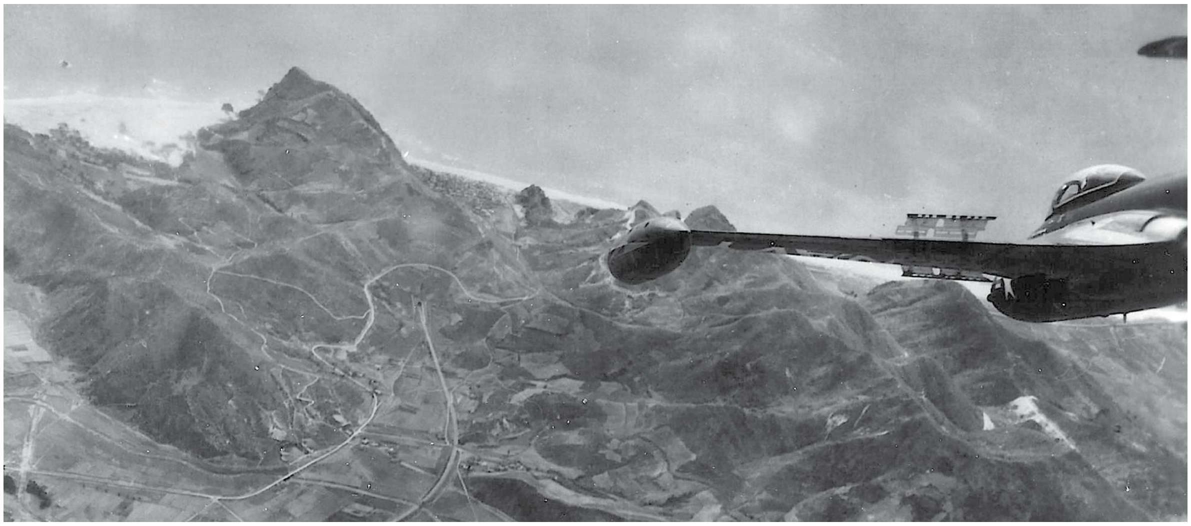
VMF-122 ‘Candystripers’ was the US Marine Corps’ first jet-equipped fighter squadron, having received FH-1 Phantoms in November 1947. It was then under the command of famed World War 2 ace Lt Col Marion E Carl, who, a few years later, would make important contributions as a photo-reconnaissance pilot in Banshees. VMF-122 upgraded to the F2H-2 in 1949 and, as part of CVG-4, joined VF-62 to embark in *Oriskany* in March 1951 as the first US Marine Corps jet squadron to deploy on board a carrier. It was under the command of Lt Col Dave Marshall. *Oriskany* returned home in October 1951, after which VMF-122 began transitioning to the F9F-5 Panther after only two years with the Banshee.

CHAPTER TWO

WAR DEPLOYMENTS

VF-172 'BLUE BOLTS'

By the time *Essex* arrived in the Western Pacific in August 1951, the nature of the Korean War had changed. The dynamic, sweeping campaigns of the first year of the conflict – the North Korean invasion of South Korea, United Nations' (UN) defence of the Pusan Perimeter, Inchon landing, UN advance well into North Korea, Chinese invasion of Korea, Chosin Reservoir evacuation – had devolved into a mostly static standoff more or less along the original line of demarcation, the 38th Parallel. This would remain the case until an armistice was signed in July 1953.



This VF-172 F2H-2 was photographed on a strafing run on a target in North Korea in September 1951. Note the extended dive brakes intended to slow and steady the jet while in steep descent. Banshees were most frequently tasked with undertaking reconnaissance missions such as this during the conflict in Korea. Using bombs and rockets, they attacked the enemy's transportation network and supply depots – a railway line leading to a tunnel is visible in the centre of this photograph (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

The war ground on, with UN air power providing close air support (CAS) for UN forces in the frontline, interdicting transportation routes, attacking large infrastructure such as powerplants, and duelling with enemy MiG-15 fighters. Always in the background was a concern over potential action with the Soviet Union.

Essex arrived with CVG-5 embarked, relieving USS *Princeton* (CV-37) and CVG-19. CO of CVG-5 was the legendary Cdr Marshall U Beebe, who served as the role model for the Commander, Air Group (CAG) in James Michener's novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri,* later made into one of the classic motion pictures about US Naval Aviation. It was CVG-5's second deployment to the war zone, but its complement of squadrons had changed significantly.

VF-51 (including future moon-landing astronaut Lt Neil Armstrong) with F9F-2 Panthers was back for the second time, along with VF-53 and its F4U-4 Corsairs. After a year of war with two jet squadrons in each CVG, some carrier air groups were now operating with one less Corsair-equipped VF unit. VF-54 had traded its F4U-4s for AD-2/3/4 Skyraiders, becoming a de facto attack squadron because of the need for more ADs in-theatre. With no dedicated VA squadron available for this deployment, VF-54 was duly reequipped. VF-52 and its F9F-2s had been replaced by the 'Blue Bolts' of VF-172, an Atlantic Fleet squadron formerly assigned to CVG-17 and commanded by Cdr M E Barnett that brought the F2H-2 Banshee to the war for the first time. VF-172 retained CVG-17's tail code 'R' on its jets, rather than adopting CVG-5's 'S'.

CVG-5 also included a typical array of detachments – VC-61 with F2H-2Ps and F9F-2Ps, VC-11 with AD-4Ws, VC-3 with F4U-5Ns, VC-35 with AD-4Ns and HU-1 with HO3S helicopters.

Essex arrived on the line with TF 77 in the Sea of Japan on 18 August 1951, and CVG-5's first missions were flown five days later. These sorties were escorted by CVG-102 aircraft from USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CV-31) in order to provide pilots with theatre orientation. In one early mission, on 25 August, 12 F2H-2s from VF-172 and an identical number of F9F-2s from VF-51 provided air cover for Fifth Air Force B-29s undertaking a high-altitude bombing strike on rail marshalling yards at Rashin – a transportation hub located on the North Korean coast 18 miles south of the Soviet border.

'This is believed to be the first time that naval jet aircraft have escorted Air Force planes over enemy territory during the Korean Campaign', Cdr Beebe wrote in his report on the line period. He also noted that the Banshees and Panthers of CVG-5 were 'used exclusively on armed reconnaissance and day CAP'. When undertaking an armed reconnaissance mission, the fighters carried 5-in. HVARs and 250- and 500-lb bombs. They would sweep a sector at medium altitude and attack targets of opportunity – mostly trucks, trains, railway track and troop concentrations. CAS and attacking hard targets was usually left to the Corsairs and Skyraiders. The combat introduction of VF-172 and the Banshee was off to a good start.

‘The combat evaluation of the F2H aircraft has been assigned to Carrier Air Group Five’, Beebe wrote. ‘The only special mention necessary in this report is that the airplane is doing an admirable job under the capable direction of VF-172’. Historian Richard P Hallion wrote in his volume *The Naval Air War in Korea* (Nautical & Aviation, 1986), quoting a US Navy evaluation report, that the Banshee ‘proved superior to the F9F in every respect’ but one – the F2H-2’s wings could not be folded if the wingtip tanks were full of fuel. If the launch of a Banshee had to be scrubbed due to a mechanical issue, taxiing the aircraft away from the catapult severely disrupted the carrier’s launch cycle. Hallion also wrote;

‘The Banshee was ideally suited for rail interdiction. Easy to maintain, ruggedly built and very resistant to flak damage, the F2H-2, with its twin jets, had a high rate of climb that permitted multiple attacks on a target. The plane’s 30-minute endurance advantage over the Panther also impressed pilots from a flight safety standpoint. Banshees attacked rail lines in 30- to 40-degree dives, using 250-lb bombs. An F2H-2 could carry four 250-lb bombs and sometimes lug four HVARs or ATARs as well. After VF-172 completed its *Essex* tour, post-tour analysis indicated that 35 per cent of all the bombs dropped by the squadron had actually managed to cut a rail line. Since this involved hitting a target no more than 60 inches wide while moving at well over 400 mph, the Banshee’s performance, and that of its pilots, was extraordinary.’

However, some flaws in the Banshee became evident over time due to the heavy pace of combat operations. ‘Up until 2 September, the Banshees had performed all assigned missions admirably. However, due to the catapult launchings with heavy loads, the supports for the catapult hooks began to crack’, Beebe wrote. ‘For this reason, the aircraft were grounded for all flights except Combat Air Patrols [CAPs], for which they were launched without external ordnance or fuel in the tip tanks’.

Within a week the situation improved. ‘By 8 September, the Banshee unit had part of the answer on the catapult hook trouble and flew armed reconnaissance, finding many targets – gun emplacements, troop bivouacs and transportation’, Beebe noted. ‘Successful drops were made on two trains, one with eight cars and the other with 27 cars, all heavily loaded. The latter was left with its engine and ten of the cars destroyed'.

The 'Blue Bolts' lost their first Banshee of the line period on 11 September. After returning from a reconnaissance mission, Lt(jg) Treadwell suffered brake failure as he taxied up the flightdeck and was unable to control BuNo 124983, which rolled into a deck-edge catwalk and then went over the side. Treadwell was quickly rescued from the sea.

CVG-5 had a particularly successful day on 16 September, when its 83 sorties dropped three bridge spans, damaged four locomotives, destroyed a hangar with stored ammunition and killed more than 200 personnel. But the day also was marked with tragedy. After completing their runs on a bridge, two VF-172 Banshees were damaged in a mid-air collision. Both aircraft, flown by Lt Cdr Irad B Oxley (BuNo 124972) and Lt(jg) John K Keller (BuNo 124968), were badly damaged, and only Keller managed to return to the task force.

'Keller's aircraft had limited aileron control and no flaps', Beebe wrote. 'He landed hook-up, bounced over the barriers and crashed into the parked planes on the starboard bow. A gasoline fire ensued. Heroic performances of duty were the predominant factors in the fighting of the fire. The flightdeck personnel and squadron personnel nearest made courageous efforts to aid the people injured by the initial explosion. Taking no heed of personal safety, they disarmed and removed ordnance loads and moved aircraft out of the danger zone'.

Douglas E Campbell, in his book *US Navy, US Marine Corps, and MATS Aircraft Lost During the Korean War*, featured the account of CVG-5 pilot Lt Clay Fisher, who observed the catastrophic mishap;

'I was just returning to the carrier after an interdiction mission late in the afternoon and found out that our recovery on the deck was going to be delayed because of an emergency landing attempt by one of VF-172's Banshees. That aircraft had a damaged aileron from a slight mid-air collision with another Banshee while flying in formation.

'We circled the *Essex* watching the final approach as the plane touched down okay, but the tailhook was not down and it crashed into a parked F9F and crushed to death a chief petty officer, also killing the [F9F] pilot. A wingtip fuel tank on the Panther exploded, spewing flaming fuel onto other aircraft that had just been taxied forward by VF-51 pilots that had been rushed out of their ready room to man their planes. One Panther was blown off the flightdeck. That pilot was Lt John Moore, who survived with deep burns on his face and ears. I think a couple of sailors were killed on the flightdeck catwalk and others suffered multiple burns. It was just getting dusk and flaming gasoline was flowing like a waterfall from the flightdeck into the water. It was a terrible tragedy.'

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VF-172 F2H-2s prepare for launch from a carrier – probably *Essex* and possibly during the unit's Korean War cruise. The jet's tip tanks, and its ability to cruise with one engine shut down, gave the Banshee exceptional range compared with the F9F Panther. The tip tanks could not be defuelled with the wings folded, however, so if the Banshee's launch was cancelled the F2H-2 had to be moved from the catapult and its tip tanks drained prior to being moved aft. Aircraft '207' was lost in a midair collision with another Banshee on 16 September 1951, its pilot, Lt Cdr Irad B Oxley, successfully ejecting (*Peter Davies Collection*)

The crash killed Keller, three personnel from VF-51 and a sailor from VF-54, two sailors were missing and 14 were injured. Keller's F2H-2 was destroyed, as were four parked aircraft, F2H-2 BuNos 124966 and 124978 and VF-51 F9F-2 BuNos 125121 and 125128. Four other CVG-5 aircraft were damaged and grounded until they could be repaired. *Essex* was able to continue flight operations soon after the mishap, but the starboard catapult remained unused until it could be inspected.

Essex left the line and docked in Yokosuka, Japan, on 21 September. During the carrier's first line period, VF-172 pilots undertook 309 sorties, including 126 CAP, 132 armed reconnaissance and 39 as escorts for photo-reconnaissance jets (because the F2H-2 had a superior rate of climb and ceiling to the F9F, it was the preferred fighter escort for F9F-2P photo reconnaissance jets) and 12 as bomber escorts for the B-29. The 'Blue Bolts' suffered no combat losses, but four Banshees had been damaged by enemy bullets and shrapnel.

Essex's initial line period of the deployment provided material for CAG Beebe's first summary of the Banshee's performance;

'The Banshee has proven satisfactory for operations from the CV-27A-class carrier, but highly skilled airmanship must be used in landing with a pitching deck. There have been two instances of landing struts being pushed up through the wing sections. The Banshee has proven that it can absorb flak damage with the best of the fleet's aircraft, and it has an extremely tough engine. In two cases particles have passed through the engines, doing considerable damage to the blades but not causing vibration or engine stoppage. Failure of the fuselage supports of the catapult hook under stress of catapult launches with high loading have occurred in some of the aircraft. The Banshee tailhook has a tendency to hang onto the arresting gear when retracted. The J34 engine is an easy powerplant to replace. Working at a normal rate, a good crew can change an engine, turn it up and calibrate it in less than two hours.'

The commanding officer of *Essex*, Capt A W Wheelock, noted in his cruise report that the 'biggest problem with the F2H aircraft is in the inability to fold or spread wings with gas in the tip tanks. This has required that the tip tanks not be gassed until the plane is in a permanent parking spot, ready to be taxied out and up to the catapult for launch. [If a dud], the tip tanks must be de-gassed in order to fold wings or store the aircraft'.

CAG Beebe also described the tactics used during the first line period by VF-172 and VF-51 in his report;

'On armed reconnaissance flights this Carrier Air Group has had the opportunity to use and evaluate three armed reconnaissance tactical dispositions consisting of two-, three- and four-plane formations. The two-plane section had been used most exclusively by the jet squadrons of TF 77 prior to arrival.

'Over a familiar route, the two-plane section is satisfactory. The low man weaves across the road and the adjacent area at 1000 to 1500 ft above the terrain and from 250 to 350 knots. The low man cannot navigate accurately or take notes if he maintains proper surveillance of the area for camouflaged targets. The number two man must therefore keep the low man in sight, navigate, take notes, and be in a position to make attacks on targets pointed out by the low man and to suppress AA [anti-aircraft artillery] positions. The two-plane section could not be used if air opposition were present.

'The three-plane armed reconnaissance is considered optimum if air opposition is not expected. The number one man functions exactly as in the two-plane flight. The number two man's only responsibility is to keep the low man in sight and attack targets. The number three man flies slightly below and 45 degrees behind the number two man so he can easily keep both planes in sight. He navigates, takes notes, and coordinates his attacks with the other two planes.

'The four-plane armed reconnaissance is slightly cumbersome but will be required when and if aerial opposition is imminent. In this formation the duties of the numbers one, two and three men are the same as in a three-plane flight. The number four man acts as a lookout and takes station abreast the number three man and weaves to maintain position.'

By the time *Essex* arrived on station for its second line period on 1 October 1951, the missions for the carrier air groups in the Sea of Japan had changed somewhat. CAS was to be suspended in favour of more interdiction of transportation routes following a notable increase in enemy road and rail traffic. Rail cutting became the primary mission.

The first strikes of the period were flown on 4 October, with CVG-5 undertaking 46 sorties and VF-172 attacking rail and supply targets. Two days later, VF-172 and VF-51 bombed and strafed two large troop concentrations, killing an estimated 70 enemy soldiers. Rail cutting and attacks on targets of opportunity continued on 8–9 October. Just after sunrise on the 9, Lt Cdr James B Cain, executive officer of the 'Blue Bolts', led a flight that chanced upon one train with three locomotives. The Banshees attacked with 100-lb bombs and strafing and stopped the train, which was destroyed over the next three days by Skyraiders.

On 5 October, two Banshees had to divert to Kangnung (K-18) airfield for tailhook repairs, which were made. With no way to power-start the jets, an AD-4Q Skyraider from VC-35 was flown in to get them running.

VF-172 suffered its first combat loss to enemy fire on 16 October. CVG-5 launched 86 sorties that day, with VF-172 and VF-51 hitting rail targets, including rolling stock, damaging two locomotives and destroying 16 boxcars and gondolas. F2H-2 BuNo 124951, flown by the squadron's operations officer, Lt Cdr Irad B Oxley – who had survived the mid-air collision on 16 September – was on armed reconnaissance over a road near Majon-Ni when his aircraft was hit by ground fire. The Banshee plunged into the ground, killing Oxley.

Fighter sweeps continued on into late October. On the 22nd, Banshees and Panthers came upon two trains and several supply depots and worked them over with bombs and 20 mm cannon fire, before leaving the ADs and F4Us to finish off what they had started.

The 'Blue Bolts' lost another Banshee in an operational mishap on 25 October when Lt(jg) Robert Doss suffered a cold shot from a catapult and his aircraft, BuNo 124959, hit the water ahead of *Essex*'s port bow. Doss was rescued by the carrier's plane guard helicopter within three minutes, having suffered mild shock and bruises.

In late October came a change of pace for CVG-5 with a mission against an industrial target. Of the 73 sorties flown that day, 20 were against industrial targets at Sonkhyon. Jets from VF-172 and VF-51 as well as Corsairs from VF-53 provided flak suppression of gun emplacements while VF-54's ADs struck the primary targets. 'Immediately the ground fire was drawn as the ADs assigned to bombing missions commenced their runs', the CVG-5 deployment report said. 'Ground fire suppression was so effective that six runs were made by the base element, of which four were bomb drops and two were fire-bomb and napalm drop's. No CVG-5 aircraft were hit by enemy fire during the attack.

On one occasion, VF-172 played a role in an extraordinary air strike in North Korea. Anti-communist guerillas operating behind enemy lines learned of a meeting of high-level North Korean and Chinese officials scheduled for that day in the town of Kapsan on the Hoch'on River in northeastern Korea. On 29 October 1951, the Joint Advisory Commission Korea transferred the intelligence to TF 77, which launched a VC-61 F9F-2P to photograph the site.

On the morning of 30 October, *Essex* launched eight ADs of VF-54 (a de facto attack squadron) under the lead of Cdr Paul Gray as the core of the strike. VA-728 from USS *Antietam* (CV-36) provided eight more Skyraiders. For flak suppression, VF-53 launched eight F4U-4s and VF-172 sortied four F2H-2s. *Antietam* also provided eight Corsairs from VF-713 and four F9F Panthers from VF-831. The strike was a success, with the Kapsan site destroyed. Hallion wrote that the guerillas reported the strike killed more than 500 officials and security personnel and destroyed the records of the Communist Party of North Korea.

Essex left the line on 31 October. In addition to the one combat loss, four other Banshees were damaged by ground fire. VF-172 had flown 66 CAP, 164 armed reconnaissance, 29 photo-reconnaissance escort sorties and 12 fighter sweeps during the period. 'Both jet squadrons are convinced of the value of carrying 100- or 250-lb bombs instead of rockets', Beebe wrote in his report. 'Rocket targets have been almost non-existent since arriving in the Korean area in August. Bombing accuracy improved steadily, and the total destruction and damage results [were] gratifying'.

Beebe described the tactics used by VF-172 during the line period;

'The bombing, strafing and rocket attacks with the Banshee are made from altitudes of 8000 to 12,000 ft, in dives of 40 to 60 degrees. This procedure results in better accuracy with bombs and rockets, more effective strafing due to impact angle and time on target and, with simultaneous runs from various directions, affords AA protection by dividing the fire and reducing the enemy's overall firing time to a minimum.'

MAJ. McCOLLOM
TURPIN ADAN
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Lt(jg) Dick Bellinger of VF-172 poses with one of the squadron's F2H-2s on board *Essex* in 1952 during its combat deployment to Korea. The aircraft was nominally assigned to USAF exchange pilot Maj Francis N McCollom, who was killed when his F2H-2 was shot down by anti-aircraft fire on 19 January 1952. Bellinger went on to down a North Vietnamese MiG-21 on 9 October 1966 with his F-8E Crusader while CO of VF-162 (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

Essex's third line period began on 1 November and lasted till 14 December. CVG-5's continued routine was interdiction strikes, and VF-172 suffered no losses. The carrier's fourth line period began on 26 December. Of this period, the CAG noted that 'the problem of interdiction has become more difficult, however, as a result of increased accuracy and intensity of enemy anti-aircraft fire'. CVG-5 flew 89 sorties on 29 December alone, making 73 cuts in rail lines and destroying three rail bridges. CAG Beebe, as noted by Hallion, also recorded the Banshee's role in a bridge-busting mission;

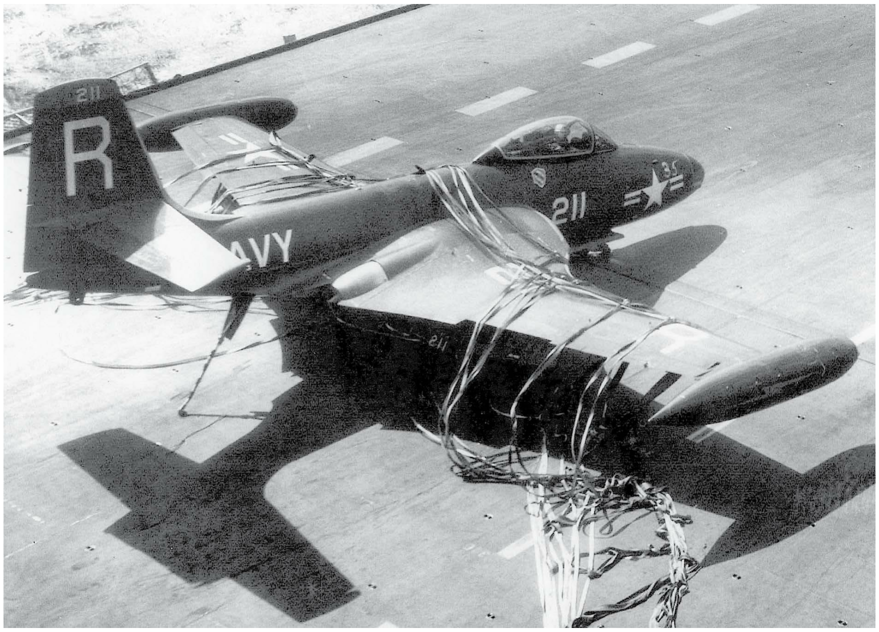
'One flak suppression mission was flown semi-coordinated with an AD [and] F4U bridge strike. The target, three bridges in a valley, was about two miles long [and one-and-a-half miles wide], bordered by 3000-ft mountains. About 48 active gun mounts of 40 mm to 5-in. with radar control were in the area. Eight Banshees loaded with four 260-lb VT [variable-time] fused frag bombs, four ATARs and 600 rounds of 20 mm made six runs each and achieved 80 per cent suppression.

'The runs were made simultaneously on four gun positions each time. The first run was made from 12,000 ft altitude in 45-degree dives, with strafing from 8000 ft down to 5000 ft and bomb release at 3000 ft. Airspeeds of 480 to 500 knots were indicated in the pullouts at 1500 to 2000 ft. Succeeding runs were begun at about 10,000 ft, and all runs were completed within a period of 15 minutes. No effort was made to escort the strike group, and the coordination was simply timing to complete the last Banshee attacks while the conventional aircraft were in their first dive. The mission was considered a success in that the bridges were knocked out and only one Banshee and one AD received damage.'

A mishap occurred on 3 January 1952 when a Banshee that had just landed on *Essex* taxied to a forward spot on the flightdeck. When the pilot shut the engines down, one of the Banshee's 20 mm cannon discharged a high-explosive round, which struck a Panther parked forward and exploded, destroying the F9F and injuring five men. The cause was laid to a broken breech lock and resulting loss of air pressure.

The 'Blue Bolts' suffered their second combat loss of the deployment on 19 January when Banshee BuNo 124945 flown by USAF exchange pilot Maj Francis Norman McCollom was hit by anti-aircraft fire while on a photo-reconnaissance escort run. 'A long tongue of flame suddenly appeared behind his plane and the run ended in an explosion as his plane hit the ground' the deployment report said. 'He was not seen to leave the cockpit'.

Rail cutting continued to be a major mission for CVG-5 during this period, but tactics changed to increase effectiveness. 'Instead of cutting track over a wide area, the concept has been to make concentrated breaks in one section of track', noted CVG-5's deployment report. 'It is believed that by this method the enemy will be unable to make repairs readily. The effectiveness of this program is exemplified by the fact that no rail traffic has moved over the target route Kowon-to-Wonsan since the program was initiated on 18 January. Key bridges and bypasses were also assigned as primary targets on the east–west rail routes, along with the eastern railroad'.



VF-172 F2H-2 BuNo 125677 is trapped by a barricade on the flightdeck of *Franklin D Roosevelt* on 14 April 1953. The operation of jet aircraft from straight-deck carriers was hazardous in any conditions and contributed to the US Navy's high aviation mishap rate in the 1950s. The advent of the angled flightdeck brought an increased measure of safety to carrier operations (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

Flak suppression missions flown by VF-172 during this period were also said to have yielded excellent results. The 'Blue Bolts' used a variety of ordnance for rail-cutting and flak suppression, including 100-, 250- and 500-lb bombs, 260-lb fragmentation bombs and 5-in. HVARs and ATARs. During the course of these operations, the squadron found the Aero 14 bomb rack to be only moderately 'satisfactory' due to the difficulties pilots experienced in releasing 500-lb general-purpose bombs at speeds of 375–450 knots. A weakness in the rack's release solenoid was suspected to be the cause of these problems, the deployment report stating, 'It was found that the bomb could usually be released if a slight negative "G" force was applied at the moment of release'.

The report also addressed the problem of fuelling the tip tanks;

'The F2H Banshee, unlike the F9F, cannot fold its wings with gas in the tip tanks. In the midst of a launch, a Banshee dud, with a wingspan of approximately 45 ft, does present a problem, but no more so than that of an F9F if handled properly. They can either be parked forward of the island with the tail outboard, aft of the island in the same position, or placed on the No. 2 elevator and then dropped to the hangar deck level and taken off onto the hangar deck.'

Despite the issues with the tip tanks, CAG Beebe praised the reliability of the F2H-2. 'The Banshee has proved to be an exceptionally reliable aircraft, and it is not uncommon to have a run of 200 Banshees launched without encountering a dud'.

VF-172 flew 475 sorties during its fourth line period – 71 strike, 152 CAP, 195 armed reconnaissance, 53 photo-reconnaissance escort and four fighter sweeps. In addition to the one combat loss, the squadron suffered damage to 14 Banshees.

Essex's fifth, and final, line period of the deployment ran from 21 February to 5 March 1952, and it continued the routine of interdiction sorties. Only two F2H-2s were damaged by enemy action and none were lost. VF-172 finished the period with 167 sorties flown – 64 CAP, 83 armed reconnaissance and 20 strike.

VF-11 'RED RIPPERS'

With the departure of *Essex* and CVG-5 from the war zone, there was a gap of almost six months before F2H-2 fighters would return to combat with TF 77. That came in September 1952 in the form of VF-11 'Red Rippers', led by Cdr Denny P Phillips, with the squadron being one of two jet fighter units assigned to CVG-101 on board USS *Kearsarge* (CVA-33). The remaining three full-strength squadrons assigned to the carrier air group were reserve units that had been called to active duty for the war.

Kearsarge had been re-commissioned on 15 February 1952 following 20 months in the Puget Sound Navy Yard in Washington. The carrier worked up with CVG-101 off San Diego, California, and Hawaii before departing for Korea. Arriving in Yokosuka on 8 September, the ship and CVG-101 began their first line period six days later and were assigned to TF 77 on 16 September, joining USS *Bon Homme Richard* (CV-31) with CVG-7, *Essex* with Air Task Group (ATG) 2 and *Princeton* with CVG-19 (all CVs would be re-designated CVAs two weeks later on 1 October 1953). Over the next five months, *Kearsarge* and CVG-101 would strike enemy targets in Korea.

CVG-101, led by Cdr H P Ady, teamed VF-11's Banshees with VF-721, which flew F9F-2s, VF-884 with F4U-4s and VA-702 with AD-4/4Ls. Reflecting its previous carrier air group assignment, VF-11 retained CVG-1's 'T' tail code on its Banshees, while the remaining three squadrons wore CVG-101's standard 'A'. Rounding out the carrier air group were detachments from VC-61 with F2H-2Ps, VC-11 with AD-4Ws, VC-3 with F4U-5Ns, VC-35 with AD-4Ns and HU-1 with HO3S helicopters.

CVG-101 flew its first strikes on 17 September, launching 94 sorties that were led by pilots from CVG-7. The next day, VF-11 and VF-721 conducted armed reconnaissance over the northern area and east coast of Korea. Upon recovery, an unexpended 5-in. HVAR broke loose from a Banshee, skidded down the flightdeck and struck two sailors on the flightdeck, resulting in one of the men losing a leg.

A change in the air war was initiated during this line period with the beginning of what came to be called 'Cherokee Strikes' in honour of Vice-Adm Joseph J 'Jocko' Clark, commander of the US Seventh Fleet, who was of Cherokee ancestry. These strikes were concentrated along the frontlines, striking emplacements that were beyond the range of UN artillery. On 30 September, CVG-101 flew 'Cherokee Strikes', with the Banshees and Panthers providing 'completely effective' flak suppression.

Although the aircraft of TF 77 rarely clashed with enemy fighters, encounters did happen. VF-884 Corsair pilot Lt Eugene F Johnson, was attacking enemy supply depots near Yongpo-Ri on 4 October when he was jumped by four MiG-15s. His F4U-4, BuNo 80798, was shot down and Johnson was killed when the fighter crashed into Wonsan Harbor. Another encounter three days later saw MiG-15s attack Corsairs and Skyraiders south of Hungnam with no losses to either side. 'The sighting of enemy jet-type aircraft in the vicinity of Wonsan has demanded more and more TARCAP [target combat air patrol] sorties be flown', CAG Ady noted in his report.

VF-11 flew an unusual mission on 8 October, with the 'Red Rippers' despatching 12 Banshees to rendezvous with ten B-29s of the USAF's 98th Bomb Wing that were undertaking a daylight raid on a rail centre at Kowon. This was only the second time in the war that US Navy aircraft had escorted USAF heavy bombers mounting an attack on a target in enemy territory. The range, ceiling and endurance of the Banshee made it a better choice for the mission than the Panther.

Shiny VF-11 F2H-2 BuNo 125649 receives a final check before launching from *Kearsarge* on a mission over Korea. The Banshee is armed with two 500-lb bombs and four 5-in. HVARs. The 500-lb bomb was the largest weapon carried into combat by the F2H-2 (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

'F2Hs were used as fighter cover for a B-29 bomber formation on one occasion. Bomber element was flown at 21,000 ft', Ady wrote in his line period report. 'Cover was flown at levels of 25,000, 30,000 and 35,000 ft, with each higher cover level being positioned aft of the one immediately below. [C]onstant weave between two plane sections was maintained in order to provide a high escort speed on station. The unexpected appearance of F-86 aircraft several thousand feet above the top cover only added emphasis to the belief that almost no type of escort would be adequate protection for the low-speed bombers against the type of attacks which could be expected from MIG attackers.

'Because of the tremendous speed differential between the B-29 and the MIG-15, no pursuit curve is necessary when the latter type of plane attacks the bomber formation. Consequently, the attack would, in effect, be nothing more than high-speed strafing runs from any direction – a difficult attack to repress with any type of jet fighter, even when operating at top speed.

'The raid was highly successful and all aircraft returned safely.'

VF-11 and VF-721 struck supply and personnel west of Wonsan on 9 October. Two days later they damaged bridges and boats along the coast during armed reconnaissance, and on the 13th they destroyed two bridges and some oxcarts south and west of Wonsan. On 14 October, both units attacked a possible radar site southwest of Hungnam, scoring 21 hits with 250-lb bombs. With enemy fighters again becoming a concern, VF-11 flew TARCAP missions west of Wonsan on 15 and 16 October. On the 16th, eight

MiG-15s approached a CVG-101 strike but withdrew when the ADs and F4Us turned on them. The TARCAP Banshees had no contact with the MiGs.

‘Banshees were used successfully on flak suppression missions’, Ady wrote of the line period. ‘Various ordnance loadings have been used, the best of which consisted of four 260-lb FRAGs [fragmentation bombs] and 4-VT [variable-timed]-fused ARs [aerial rockets] per plane. Mixed loadings were not found to be conducive to optimum accuracy, however, and it is believed that better results could be attained by loading half of the planes with all bombs and half with all rockets. Best results with regard to timing between flak suppression aircraft and dive-bombers were obtained when the jets pushed over about 30 seconds prior to the first conventional plane.

‘Fuelled with full tip tanks, F2Hs were launched 40 minutes after the conventional strike aircraft. Rendezvous was effected at a pre-designated point, usually 15–25 miles short of target. By shutting down one engine between attacks while the strike group rendezvoused and climbed back to altitude, the F2Hs were able to make two flak suppression attacks coordinating with the strike group; remain in the target area to cover the entry and exit of the strike group; and precede the strike group to base (single engine) for recovery two hours and ten minutes after launch. However, with currently increased MIG activity, it is deemed more prudent to keep airspeed up over target with both engines operating, resulting in flight of two hours maximum.’

On the last day on the line, 17 October, VF-11 flew armed reconnaissance over supply targets in numerous sectors, and supported Rescue Combat Air Patrols for downed pilots. Three days later *Kearsarge* pulled into Yokosuka for a rest. VF-11 had flown 71 strike, 190 armed reconnaissance, 79 photo-reconnaissance escort and 141 CAP sorties. The squadron suffered no losses, but six of its F2H-2s were damaged. The Banshee’s sortie rate included an impressive 270 consecutive ‘dudless’ sorties.

The line period report discussed three of the Banshee’s peculiarities in deck handling. The crew had built handling stands in order to remove tip tanks in case of a dud, thus allowing the wings to be folded more quickly, easing flightdeck handling. The report also recommended that carriers with Banshee squadrons equip their tow-tractors and tow-bars for towing the aircraft from the aft position, which was accomplished by turning the towing lugs on the universal tow-bar through 90 degrees and equipping the tractors with a padded ‘T’ frame to keep the Banshee’s tail from injuring the driver.

CVG-101 also discovered that a shortage of starter carts delayed launches, especially because F2H-2s took longer to start than Panthers. At least four carts were needed to launch a group of 20 jets.

Kearsarge and CVG-101 departed Yokosuka on 20 October and rejoined the line on the 28th, with the first strikes being launched on 1 November. On 4, 5 and 6 November, CVG-101 launched sorties to the Hamhung and Wonsan areas. On the 6th, VF-11 and VF-721 destroyed or damaged a number of supply buildings. Banshee BuNo 125068 had to take the barricade upon returning to *Kearsarge*, but broke only a port wingtip light.

On 8 November, VF-884 and VA-702 coordinated with VF-11 and VF-721 to strike enemy heavy artillery positions in the central sector of the frontline. The pilots reported that the flak was the heaviest encountered to date, resulting in the downing of the CO of VF-884.

The *Kearsarge* history in the *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* recorded the following;

'Jets assailed supply areas south of Wonsan with what the ship reported as "excellent results", and night hecklers destroyed trucks and damaged a small ship off the beach in the vicinity of Songjan-Man. Foul weather over the target area hampered operations on 9 November, and the carrier only sent 20 sorties into the air. Corsairs and Skyraiders attacked troops and gun positions along the central front on 10 November, and jets destroyed a number of trucks and ox-carts traveling along the main supply route. Heavy weather to the north precluded planned strikes in those areas, and aircraft flew 99 sorties from the ship. A weather front impacted operations over the following days, but on the 15th *Kearsarge* sent 86 sorties against the communists. Planes and jets destroyed many ox-carts and a few trucks, supported troops at the front, and spotted naval gunfire salvoes along the coast.'

VF-11 and VF-721 successfully hit supply depots in the Chonjin area on 17 November. Action the following day would be both different and rather more exciting. *Kearsarge* shared TF 77's CAP tasking with fighters from *Essex* and *Oriskany*, and on 18 November, while CVG-101's Corsairs and Skyraiders were working over the Hoeryong area and its Banshees and Panthers struck targets along the beach between Chong-jin and the Soviet border, *Kearsarge* received a report of 'bogies' at an altitude of 25,000 ft. Cdr Ady recorded the encounter in his line report;

'On 18 November a CAP of four [VF-11] Banshees was vectored north of the force at 30,000 ft to intercept bogies reported at 25,000 ft. The formation maintained by the CAP throughout the encounter consisted of sections spaced abeam at 600 ft, and with wingmen four plane lengths to the outside of section leaders, and well up on the beam. This formation allowed maximum visual coverage of the opposite section, and paid large dividends before the flight was completed. After a short time out on vector, two MiGs were sighted at "12 o'clock down", eight miles, on a course paralleling the CAP's vector. At a speed of approximately 0.22 Mach, the CAP was able to slowly close with the two aircraft. When the separation was two miles, the two MiGs increased speed and moved away rapidly.

'The CAP was then ordered to resume station. As a left turn was started, the CAP leader sighted eight MiGs at "two o'clock up", eight miles. This situation indicated the possibility of a trap using the first two MiGs at lower altitude as bait. The CAP maneuvered to keep those eight MiGs in sight for approximately five minutes, after which the latter departed the area on a northwesterly heading.

'The CAP resumed a southerly vector for station. After approximately one minute on course, two MiGs were sighted by the leader in a run on the second section from "five o'clock high". The second section was to starboard of the lead section. The leader ordered the second section to stand by for a break to starboard, and then began a right turn for interception. The MiGs immediately broke off the attack to the right before entering firing range, and rapidly climbed away from the CAP. The CAP was then ordered to return to base.

'During this entire incident the CAP managed to maintain an up-sun position, which gave the F2H aircraft a definite visibility advantage. The CAP pilots reported that the silver finish of the MiGs made long-range sightings quite easy under such sun conditions.'

Of note, this encounter occurred the same day that seven Soviet MiG-15s attacked three F9F-5s from VF-781, embarked in *Oriskany*. Lt E Royce Williams and Lt(jg)s John D Middleton and David M Rowlands scored hits on the MiGs in the ensuing dogfight. Williams was unofficially credited with four kills following this clash, and Soviet records opened decades later confirmed that three MiGs were shot down and a fourth was so badly damaged that it crashed while returning to base. Because of the communications intelligence used to monitor the encounter, and the possibility that the clash could have sparked a diplomatic row, the dogfight was kept secret for years. VF-11 and VF-721 each had a division of fighters airborne and two minutes away from the MiGs, but the intercept controllers failed to vector them to the fight.

VF-11 F2H-2 BuNo 125068 flies over the snow-covered mountains of North Korea during a sortie in late 1952. The aircraft has 73 mission tally markings beneath the cockpit. VF-11 was the second of four fighter squadrons to take the F2H-2 into combat during the Korean War. It was the only active-component squadron in reserved-manned CVG-101, and the unit's aircraft wore CVG-1's tail code 'T' while the remaining fighter and attack squadrons in the carrier air group were adorned with the tail code 'A' (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

During the period 20 to 25 November, CVG-101 hammered enemy positions. While F4Us and ADs flew CAS along the central sector, VF-11 and VF-721 provided flak suppression and also struck a lumber mill north of Hungnam on 20 November 'with excellent results'. The jets destroyed trucks and ox-carts on the 22nd, hit a supply area in Pyongyang on the 23rd, destroyed buildings near Hungnam on the 25th and struck a supply depot near Kilchu on the 26th. The interdiction strikes by jets on the 29th hit ox-carts and a supply depot north of Hamhung. Jets also supported a strike on a supply depot in Pyongyang. *Kearsarge* left the line on 4 December for Yokosuka, arriving on the 6th.

Cdr Ady described lessons learned during the period regarding flak suppression;

'Effective flak suppression for the strike group continued to be one of the most important problems facing the jet fighters. The increase in enemy flak along the frontlines made the development of sound flak suppression tactics a "must". Although several methods were tried, the following plan, with minor variations, appeared to give most satisfactory results. One division of jets preceded the strike group in on the target area by approximately 15-30 seconds. Strafing was commenced high and was continuous throughout the run. Known gun positions were points of aim for both strafing and fragmentation bombs. The remaining division(s) of the flak suppression team remained near the pushover point.

'Section attacks were initiated upon sighting flashes from flak batteries, or, if none were apparent, sections made flanking runs, parallel to the strike group dive path. Half the remaining jet sections entered dives with the last of the bombers, and the other half entered dives behind the last of the fighter-bombers. In the event that only eight jets were assigned for flak suppression, the first division would recover from the initial attacks and tail in behind the last of the strike group to cover the pullout of the last propeller planes.'

VF-11 suffered no losses during the line period, but four of its Banshees had been damaged by enemy fire. The squadron had flown 228 CAP, 120 strike, 110 armed reconnaissance, 59 photo-reconnaissance escort and 14 unspecified special-mission sorties. The 'Red Rippers' sustained a 94.6 per cent aircraft availability rate for its assigned sorties.

Kearsarge, with CVG-101 embarked, departed Yokosuka on 16 December for the Sea of Japan and launched its first strikes on the 18th, with VF-11 and VF-721 supporting VF-884 and VA-702 as the latter units hit supply depots behind the central front. Over the next two weeks of almost daily strikes, VF-11 joined in the intensive attacks on enemy transportation routes and supply depots, striking trucks and ox-carts, cutting rail lines and providing flak suppression for the ADs and F4Us. MiG-15s were spotted flying north and west of Wonsan on 21 December, but no aerial combat ensued.

CVG-101 continued the routine of interdiction strikes on Christmas Day, with VF-11 and VF-721 cutting a rail line in several locations. On the 27th the jets again undertook interdiction strikes and provided flak suppression during an attack on a supply depot north of Hamhung.

On 30 December, the 'Red Rippers' provided TARCAP for a strike by ADs and F4Us near Unggi, on North Korea's border with China. CVG-101 aircraft also hit transportation routes north of Songjin. VF-11 suffered its first combat loss that day when Lt James F Lee was apparently shot down by ground fire near Yangdok, his F2H-2 (BuNo 125060) being seen to crash during an attack on camouflaged buildings east of Majon-ni.

On the last day of 1952, VF-11 flew armed reconnaissance of the main supply routes in all sectors. Two days later, on 2 January 1953, VF-11 and VF-721 provided TARCAP for a special strike by ADs and F4Us in the vicinity of Hachon. Skyraiders and Corsairs from CVG-101 also destroyed rail cars and ox-carts in separate strikes on the 2nd. On 3 January, the last day on the line, VF-11 and VF-721 suppressed flak to cover ADs and F4Us hitting the frontline. Jets also destroyed buildings, trucks and ox-carts. *Kearsarge* left the line on 4 January for a liberty port visit to Hong Kong.

A VF-11 F2H-2 releases a bomb on a target in a mountainous region of North Korea. Flak was the main threat to US Navy carrier aircraft during the conflict because communist MiG-15s tended to concentrate on patrolling 'MiG Alley' in northwestern Korea, whereas most Banshee missions were flown in the east of the country closer to the frontline. MiG-15 encounters were, therefore, few and far between, and no Banshees were lost to enemy aircraft as a result (*Peter Davies Collection*)

In addition to the loss of Lt Lee's Banshee, VF-11 incurred damage to five F2H-2s as a result of enemy fire during the line period. The 'Red Rippers' had flown 76 strike, 92 armed reconnaissance, 39 photo-reconnaissance escort, 69 CAP and 18 TARCAP sorties. Aircraft availability was 89 per cent.

In his line report for this period of intense action, Ady praised the range of the F2H-2;

'The long-range capability of the Banshee was exploited by using the F2H-2 aircraft for long-range armed reconnaissance missions. These flights usually proceeded north to Chongjin (approximately 180 miles) to begin the recce of points to the extreme north. Chongjin could be reached in 25 minutes, and the return from the end of the route could be made in 35 minutes. Therefore, 30 minutes remained to be spent along the assigned route on attacks on prebriefed targets or targets of opportunity. Similarly, F2H type aircraft can comfortably attack any target in Korea without the necessity of moving the Task Force from its normal operating area.'

Kearsarge began its final line period of the deployment on 16 January 1953, departing Hong Kong and re-joining TF 77 on 19 January, with *Oriskany* and USS *Valley Forge* (CVA-45) on station. The missions of CVG-101 for this line period were 'to fly close air support of ground troops, destruction of enemy military supplies in the North Eastern half of Korea, interdiction of enemy main supply routes, destruction of enemy vehicles and ground troops, air support of NGF [naval gunfire support], and support of East Coast Blockade and Escort Force. Photographic and weather flights were employed in support of these missions as required'.

Combat sorties began on 21 January, with VF-11 and VF-721 providing flak suppression for ADs and F4Us flying CAS along the eastern sector of the frontline. The jets also attacked a mine 15 miles northeast of Yangdok. The next day, the Banshee and Panther squadrons provided flak suppression for strikes along the supply routes east and south of Wonsan, and also attacked a supply depot near Kumdong-Ni.

The 23rd was a day of loss for the 'Red Rippers'. The skipper, Cdr Denny Phillips, was flying an armed reconnaissance mission when he dove on an enemy formation and his F2H-2 (BuNo 125668) was hit by gunfire and crashed about five miles west of Wonsan. A website of the US Naval Academy Alumni Association (**usnamemorialhall.org**) features an article on Phillips written by Robert Schakne, a staff correspondent for International News Services, and published in the *Newport Daily News* of 27 January 1953;

'Commander Denny Phillips, one of the Navy's best, is missing in action and probably dead. An officer with the fleet told me Phillips went down near Wonsan when a burst of antiaircraft fire sent his Pantherjet (sic) [Banshee] fighter-bomber spinning helplessly out of control to the ground.

'Denny Phillips was an Annapolis man from Jacksonville, Florida, who would cram his six-foot, six-inch body into the cockpit of his jet fighter and lead his squadron from the flightdeck of the carrier USS *Kearsarge* to the flak-filled skies over North Korea.

'I saw Denny Phillips last in the ready room of his squadron, known as the "Red Rippers", just before he sailed for what was to be his last tour in Korea. He told me about catapulting from the deck of a carrier in a high-speed jet fighter, about attacking a target, about coming home to the flightdeck.

‘He didn’t talk about the dangers willingly, and the dangers seemed not to worry him. “You can’t worry about flak, because you have too much to do”, he said. “You don’t know about it until after it happens, if you’re hit. We don’t worry about it, but we think about it.”

‘Denny Phillips never led but always followed his flight into the fight. He explained that antiaircraft gunners had their aim zeroed in by the time the last plane in the flight entered its dive-bombing run, and so he took the final spot.

‘The men who fly jet fighter-bombers from the decks of flat-tops against the communists conduct the major portion of the Navy’s air effort. Their sector is the eastern and northeastern portion of communist Korea. They fly looking for communist supplies through valleys lined with communist anti-aircraft guns. They fight few MIGs. Their work is a dirty, daily and dangerous drudge. “It’s important”, Phillips told me, “because they need us. We know that troops on the ground need close support. We know it’s important. The odds are lousy, but it’s got to be done.”

‘The odds were lousy for Phillips that day in January. But it had to be done, and he did it.’

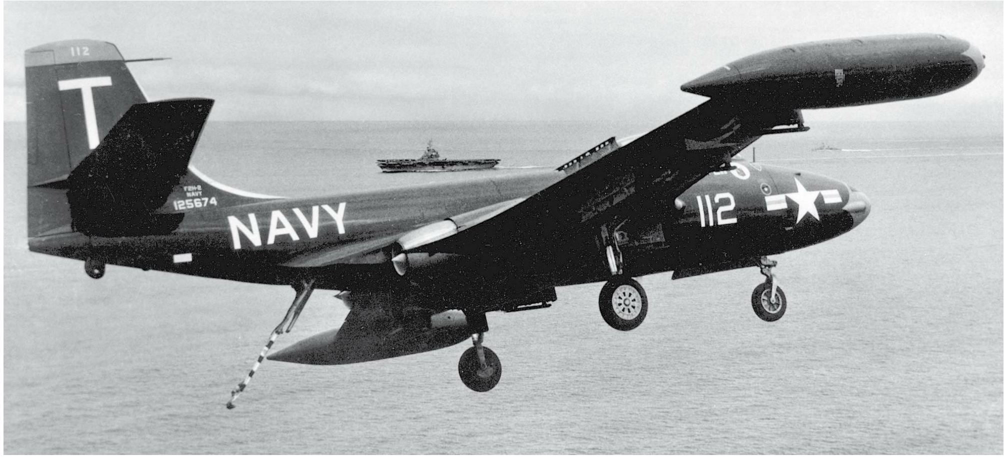
Phillips was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross for his final mission.

Following the loss of this well-liked CO, Lt Cdr Lawrence E Flint became commanding officer of VF-11. The same day, another of the unit’s Banshees (BuNo 125002) careened into the *Kearsarge*’s barrier at 70 knots. The aircraft’s port landing gear was sheared off by the barrier moments before the jet was snagged by the barricade. The damage to the jet was significant but the pilot was uninjured.

On the 24th, the jets struck a depot near Kanbalgo-ri. VF-11 and VF-721 provided flak suppression on the 25th for CAS strikes in the frontline’s central and eastern sectors and also hit the main supply routes north of Wonsan and supply areas near Haksongchon and Songunyong-ni. During the next two days the jets struck the supply routes north and west of Wonsan.

Although foul weather limited the number of sorties flown on 28 January, the jets still provided TARCAP and flak suppression to support ADs and F4Us that were striking supply depots near Pyongbugun. Jets also prowled the main supply routes north and west of Wonsan. After a day of no air operations, the jets were back in action on the 30th with similar missions and on the 31st with attacks in sectors north of Wonsan. One strike by a large number of jets struck a billeting area in Wonsan. On 1 February, the jets hit supply depots at Chukka-ni, Taemok, Tokso-dong and Young-ni. The next day they provided TARCAP for ADs and F4Us that were conducting CAS and undertook armed reconnaissance of supply routes.

On 4 February, more poor weather reduced *Kearsarge*'s flight operations, although CVG-101 was still able to launch strikes and provide CAS. The jets struck supply routes near Hamhung and supply depots at Kilchu and Hungnam. The 4th was also a date of some significance in that CVG-101 became a fully active-component carrier air group when the US Navy re-designated a number of activated reserve units – most of them serving in the Korean War – as active-component units. Accordingly, CVG-101 was re-designated CVG-14, with VF-721, VF-884 and VA-702 becoming VF-141, VF-144 and VA-145, respectively. VF-11, as an active-component unit already, retained its designation.



VF-11's F2H-2 BuNo 125674 banks and turns from the downwind leg to the '180' as it heads for the deck of *Kearsarge* at the end of another mission over Korea. The F2H-2 proved to be a very reliable aircraft during its handful of combat deployments, earning praise from carrier air group commanders (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

Weather limited CVG-14 to only two sorties on 5 February and 35 sorties on the 6th, with aircraft striking targets in the Hamhung-Hungnam area. The next day, poor conditions allowed only three sorties to be flown. Full-scale operations resumed on the 8th, with VF-11 and VF-721 providing flak suppression and a strike against a supply depot. On the 9th, the jets hit logistics targets on the northern main supply routes and struck personnel and supply shelters at Pukchong and Sambong. The next day, the jets attacked more supply buildings near Hoerhong, Komusan and Purongdong. On 12 February all 95 of CVG-14's sorties struck supply and billeting buildings in the vicinity of Wonsan.

CVG-14 put 113 sorties into the air on the 14th, including many ‘Cherokee Strikes’. The jets provided flak suppression as usual and hit supply depots near Wonsan and south of Majon-ni. The 16th was similar, with the jets suppressing flak, attacking a depot at Majon-ni and scouring the main supply routes in the central and northern sectors. The next day, Banshees and Panthers conducted armed reconnaissance in all sectors and hit supply depots in the Hungnam area and east of Yangdok. On the 18th, VF-11 and VF-141 joined VF-144 and VA-145 in attacking rail targets, including bridges between Wonsan and Puchong.

On the 20th, while ADs and F4Us flew CAS along the central sector of the front, VF-11 and VF-141 attacked the main supply routes west and north of Wonsan, including Kosong. The next day was *Kearsarge*’s last on the line, with the onset of more bad weather limiting CVG-14 to 47 sorties. Operations commenced with morning hecklers attacking rail lines along the coast north and south of Wonsan, after which F2Hs, F9Fs, ADs and F4Us bombed rail lines north of Songjin. On 22 February, after the task force commander presented awards to the ship and carrier air group personnel, *Kearsarge* departed the Korean War at 1212 hrs local time. As the vessel steamed for Yokosuka, CVG-14 sent nine jets and 26 propeller-driven aircraft ashore in Japan to be used as spares for succeeding carrier air groups in-theatre.

During the final line period, VF-11 flew 194 strike, 137 armed reconnaissance, 54 photo-reconnaissance escort, 142 CAP, 12 TARCAP and three other sorties. The squadron sustained a 95 per cent availability rate. In addition to the loss of its skipper on 23 January, the ‘Red Rippers’ suffered combat damage to only two Banshees and operational damage to eight other aircraft, including one that had its cockpit canopy separate during a catapult launch.

After an upkeep period in Yokosuka, *Kearsarge* with CVG-14 embarked departed the navy yard on 28 February and arrived in San Diego on 17 March. CVG-14’s CAG, Cdr T B Clark, wrote that ‘[m]orale of the officers and men of the Carrier Air Group created no serious problems during the entire combat tour. The fatigue of long strenuous hours became quite noticeable after a four-week period on the line. From 14 September 1952 to 25 February 1953, this Carrier Air Group spent two eight-day and one ten-day periods in port. However, the results obtained by this Carrier Air Group at all times speak for themselves. During winter months, a three-week tour on the line should be the maximum under a heavy operating schedule. Extensions of tours should be avoided if at all possible.'

VF-22 'CAVALIERS' AND VF-62 'GLADIATORS'

The deployment of USS *Lake Champlain* (CVA-39) to the Korean War began on 26 April 1953 after a shakedown cruise in Cuban and Haitian waters. The carrier departed Naval Station Mayport, Florida, and steamed for Japan, crossing the Atlantic Ocean, Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, Indian Ocean and South China Sea, arriving in Yokosuka on 9 June 1953. In the process, *Lake Champlain* became the largest ship to transit the Suez Canal.

Embarked in the carrier was CVG-4, led by Cdr J R Sweeney. The carrier air group was the first to deploy to Korea with two Banshee fighter squadrons in the form of VF-22 and VF-62, both equipped with F2H-2s and led by Lt Cdrs M J Wolley and W W Kelly, respectively. One F4U-4 Corsair squadron, VF-44, and one AD-4B squadron, VA-45, were also included, as were Detachments '44' of VC-12 with AD-4Ws, VC-33 with AD-4Ns, VC-62 with F2H-2Ps and VC-4 with four F2H-2Bs, four F3D-2s and four F4U-5Ns.

This deployment marked the first occasion that nuclear-capable F2H-2Bs and AD-4Bs had deployed aboard a carrier to the war zone, and it was the only carrier-based combat deployment for the F3D-2. The F2H-2Bs were sent ashore to NAS Atsugi and the F3D-2s were despatched to a Korean airfield for nightfighter operations with the US Marine Corps shortly after *Lake Champlain* arrived in-theatre.

The carrier sortied from Yokosuka on 11 June as flagship for TF 77 and launched its first strikes against targets in Korea two days later. Detailed records for the ship's first line period are not available, but it is known that CVG-4 conducted the familiar missions of attacking enemy personnel concentrations, bunkers, supply routes and depots, and airfield runways. On the very day CVG-4 flew its first strikes in Korea, VF-22's F2H-2 BuNo 123377 inadvertently fired several rounds of 20 mm projectiles after landing. They hit VF-62 F2H-2s BuNos 123333 and 123328, causing strike damage to both as they burst into flames.

The line period ended on 27 June and *Lake Champlain* returned to Yokosuka on the 28th. The carrier's time in port included an unusual event – the swapping of an F4U squadron for an F9F squadron. *Lake Champlain* was fitted with the new, more powerful H-8 catapults that enabled the F9F-5 to launch with a normal load of eight 250-lb bombs. However, USS *Boxer*

(CVA-21) lacked this equipment, thus preventing VF-111 (which was part of ATG-1 embarked in the carrier) from realising the jet's full combat potential. The TF 77 commander duly directed that VF-111 and its F9F-5s leave ATG-1 (which also included F9F-2 squadrons VF-52 and VF-151) to replace VF-44 and its F4U-4s in CVG-4. VF-44 was in turn transferred to ATG-1. The swap was reversed on 10 October 1953 when VF-111 returned to ATG-1 for *Boxer*'s transit home.

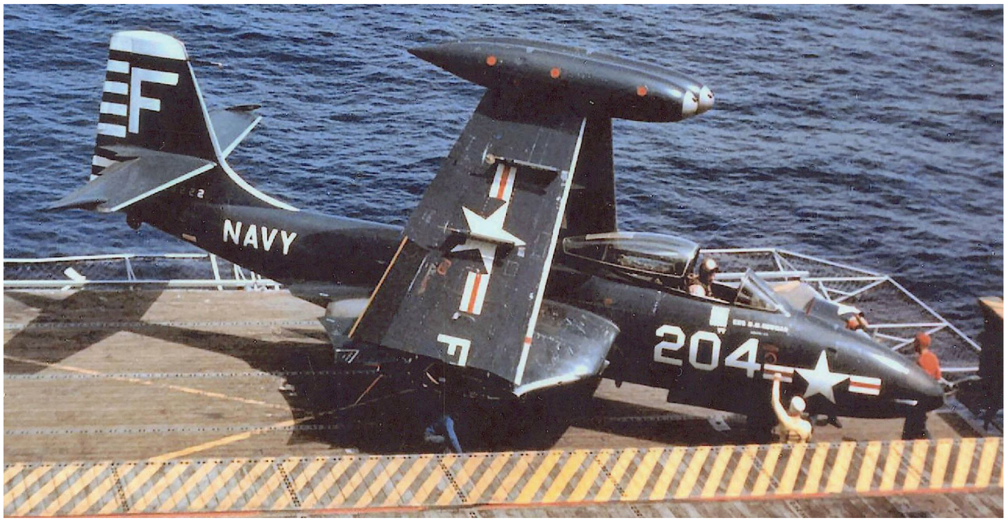
Lake Champlain departed Yokosuka and arrived on the line on 11 July for its second line period of the war, with CVG-4 commencing strikes into Korea three days later. VF-22, VF-62 and VF-111 supported the group's 'Cherokee Strikes' on the 15th and struck bridges on the 16th. The following day, the Banshees hit more rail and highway bridges and trains in the 'Cherokee' zone. Similar strikes continued through to 20 July. On the 19th, a Banshee was holed in four places from a bomb blast, and on the 20th, another Banshee took a 37 mm round through a wing forward of the wing stub fuel tank. Fortunately, the shell did not explode.

VF-22, VF-62 and VF-111 flew armed reconnaissance over central and northern Korea on the 22nd, undertaking rocket and bomb attacks on trucks and box cars. One Banshee took a 0.45-cal round through the horizontal stabiliser, and VF-62's BuNo 123282 was hit by a 37 mm projectile in the area of the port stub fuel tank, which began to burn. The pilot, Lt Harold C Jones, ejected from the jet and was pulled from the water off the east coast of Korea 12 minutes later by a helicopter launched by the heavy cruiser USS *Bremerton* (CA-130). Jones credited his survival on earlier training in the cockpit escape trainer, stating '"Dilbert Dunker" paid off!'

23 July saw a record number of sorties launched by the carriers of TF 77. CVG-4 accounted for 157 of those, mainly CAS and 'Cherokee Strikes' along the frontline 'to keep the enemy from augmenting his positions on the front and building up his supplies', according to the line period report. The carrier air group also destroyed 24 box cars and 15 trucks. Four Banshees were damaged during the strikes, one by flak and three from bomb blasts.

Furthermore, Ens H K Wallace of VF-22 was killed that day. During a catapult launch, F2H-2 BuNo 123336 lost its port tip tank. The line report said that the Banshee 'careened down the deck and proceeded to rotate after reaching the end of the deck such that it immediately entered the water upside down. It sank in about seven seconds, and though an extensive search was made, Ens Wallace did not get out of the aircraft. A preliminary review indicates a tip tank attachment pin failed. The unsatisfactory tip tank attachment had been reported by this command at least a month prior to the accident, but the lateness of receipt of the fix prevented its incorporation'.

TF 77 set another sortie record on the 24th, with CVG-4 contributing 149 and dropping 104 tons of ordnance. The jets struck the routes and depots. A total of 43 buildings were destroyed by the carrier air group, with 11 more badly damaged. One Banshee was struck by a 37 mm projectile and a number of 20 mm rounds, causing damage in multiple locations, but it still managed to return to *Lake Champlain*. On the 25th, CVG-4 generated 148 sorties. The jets hit rail and highway bridges while the ADs conducted CAS, with the carrier air group dropping 105 tons of ordnance. The pilots noticed an increased amount of flak which damaged several aircraft, including two Banshees. Two other F2H-2s were damaged by bomb blasts.



Wings folded, VF-62 F2H-2 BuNo 123222 is positioned on the partly lowered port-side elevator of *Lake Champlain* in waters off Korea. While most carrier air groups colour-coded their squadrons according to modex to distinguish their aircraft, CVG-4 trimmed all of its aircraft in white. VF-62, along with sister squadron VF-22, was on hand with TF 77 in mid-1953 to support the 'Cherokee Strikes' mounted against Chinese supply positions behind the frontlines in the final weeks of the war (*Peter Davies Collection*)

A shift in emphasis took place on the 26th, with the jets flying farther north to strike airfields. They inflicted 63 craters on Hoeryong airfield, while the Skyraiders, precluded by weather from undertaking CAS missions, hit targets in the Wonsan area. It was yet another day of loss for VF-22, with Ens Edwin C. Broyles, flying F2H-2 BuNo 123226, failing to rendezvous after an attack run near Honggun-Ni. The line report recorded that a 'large explosion on the ground occurred at about the time he should have effected rendezvous. Ens Broyles' aircraft was last seen in a 40-degree dive at about 6000 ft. No pilot ejection noted. An extensive search of the area conducted with negative results'. He was declared missing in action.

On 27 July CVG-4 flew 124 sorties, with some of the aircraft involved dropping leaflets announcing the armistice that would come into effect later that day. In the meantime, CVG-4 conducted CAS until the truce was signed, while the Banshees and Panthers flew missions 'to render all North Korean airfields in North Korea non-operational at the time of the signing of the truce'. CAS missions were carried out by ADs and F4Us up until the truce was signed. The Korean War came to a halt with the enforcement of the armistice.

During *Lake Champlain*'s second, and final, line period, the Banshees of VF-22 and VF-62 flew 268 armed reconnaissance sorties, 167 'Cherokee Strikes', 57 photo-reconnaissance escort sorties and 20 training flights. In addition to the two Banshees lost, a further eight were damaged by enemy fire.

In his report, CAG Sweeney wrote about having three jet squadrons embarked in *Lake Champlain*;

'This Air Group has tried both the ATP-1 rendezvous for jets [10,000 to 15,000 ft] and the standard low-altitude [2000 to 3500 ft] rendezvous for jets. Whenever the aircraft in a jet flight are eight or less, the low-altitude rendezvous is far superior in that it permits a quicker rendezvous and subsequent quicker departure for the target. During this tour, with three jet squadrons deployed, two jet squadrons rendezvoused low and one high. This worked satisfactorily.

'For the first time, with three jet squadrons deployed, this Air Group directed that all jets, regardless of type, rendezvous at 15,000 ft in the proper sector upon return to force. This worked without any difficulty. Obviously, in view of its limited fuel endurance, the F9F-5 was landed first in almost every case.'

Sweeney noted that the F9F-5's service ceiling was considerably less than that of the F2H-2. 'Accordingly, where the two types of aircraft are employed at the same time, the F2H-2 should be higher and the F9F-5 should be the lower'. He also lamented the tip tank problems that had plagued all units equipped with Banshees during the conflict. 'The necessity for having wings spread in order to fuel tip tanks is undesirable for the fast flightdeck operations required during combat'.

Furthermore, Sweeney highlighted a problem that afflicted the Banshee's fuel transfer system. 'The present F2H-2 tip tank transfer system is unsatisfactory in that fuel transfer is unreliable, with the result that an excessive number of tip tanks had to be jettisoned. F2H-2 tip tanks are in very short supply in WestPac [Western Pacific], and if an interim measure of sending aircraft with a faulty transfer of tip tanks to emergency fields had not been adopted, the shortage of tanks would have curtailed proper utilization of the aircraft.'

CAG also noted issued with the jet's tailhook. 'The F2H-2 has an excellent tailhook installation, but the necessity for reining it in manually whenever the pneumatic pressure is too low caused numerous "getting-out-of-the-gear" difficulties. Despite these problems, Sweeney had high praise for the Banshee;

'In spite of the foregoing comments, the F2H-2 has definitely proven itself to be a good fighter-bomber even though it was primarily designed as a high-altitude interceptor. It is an excellent carrier jet aircraft, and its dual-engine installation possesses definite advantages for modern day carrier operations. Its range and speed definitely are superior to those of the F9F-5. It is the only carrier-based aircraft in the area which could carry a full bomb load [four 250- and four 100-lb bombs] to targets on the upper reaches of the Yalu, remain on target for about 22 minutes, and return to the task force (when in the normal operating area) in 90 minutes.'

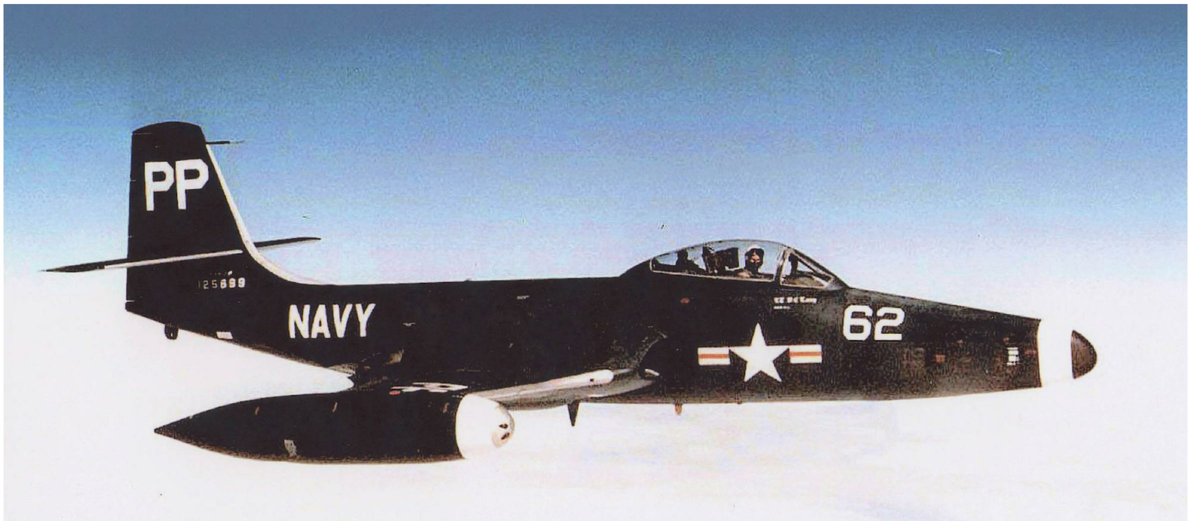
The commanding officer of *Lake Champlain*, Capt L B Southerland, also compared the F2H-2 with the F9F-5, noting that the 'F9F is short legged as compared to the F2H. The F2H proved to have a more comfortable margin. The F2H is limited to 1400 lbs of bombs or rockets, whereas the F9F can carry 2000 lbs when an H-8 catapult is available'.

Lake Champlain was relieved by *Kearsarge* on 11 October and headed east, arriving at Mayport on 4 December 1953. The hot war was over for the Banshee, but the Cold War would continue to test it.

CHAPTER THREE

PHOTO-BANSHEE

Since the early days of World War 2, the US Navy and US Marine Corps had procured photo-reconnaissance versions of their frontline carrier fighters, including the Wildcat, Hellcat, Corsair, Tigercat and Bearcat. Speed and armament dictated the logic, which continued into the jet age with the Panther and the Banshee. From an airframe perspective, the modification of a jet fighter with engine intakes at the wing roots into a photo-reconnaissance aircraft was relatively simple. The nose with its guns was replaced by a nose with camera mounts and windows. But the camera mounts required precise engineering, and the compartment required pressurisation and climate control to ensure proper operation at altitude, including prevention of condensation on the windows.



F2H-2P BuNo 125699 served with VC-61 for a number of years in the 1950s, undertaking both Korean War and WestPac deployments with various detachments. The F2H-2P quickly proved its superiority as a photo-reconnaissance platform during the conflict in Korea, the aircraft eventually replacing the F9F-2P on carrier decks as the war ground on. VC-61's Banshees usually wore the squadron's 'PP' tail code rather than the codes of the carrier air groups they were temporarily assigned to (*Peter Davies Collection*)

The photo nose for the Banshee featured three camera bays, in which cameras could be shock-mounted to rotate through five different positions – two starboard oblique, two port oblique and one vertical. Camera controls and a viewfinder were fitted in the cockpit. Later in the 1950s a round window looking forward was added to the tip of the nose and the forward camera station was modified to house a forward-looking camera, either still-photo or motion picture-capable.

The overall length of the Banshee increased from 40 ft 2 in to 42 ft 10.5 in with the fitment of the photo nose. Only two wing stations (2 and 7) were retained to carry photo-flash cartridge dispensers (with 20 cartridges each). The wingtip fuel tanks were retained as well. An aerial refuelling probe was never installed on the F2H-2P. F2H-2 BuNo 123366 was modified with a photo nose and made its first flight on 12 October 1950. The 89 production F2H-2Ps were built in four lots – 125072-125079, 125680-125706, 126673-126695 and 128857-128886.

The F4U-4P/5P and F8F-1P/2P were the standard photo-reconnaissance carrier aircraft during the late 1940s, equipping VC-61 in the Pacific Fleet and VC-62 in the Atlantic Fleet. As with the fighter version of the Panther, the F9F-2P entered service ahead of the F2H-2P, with the aircraft making its combat debut over Korea with Detachment E of VC-61 (part of CVG-19) embarked in *Princeton* from November 1950.

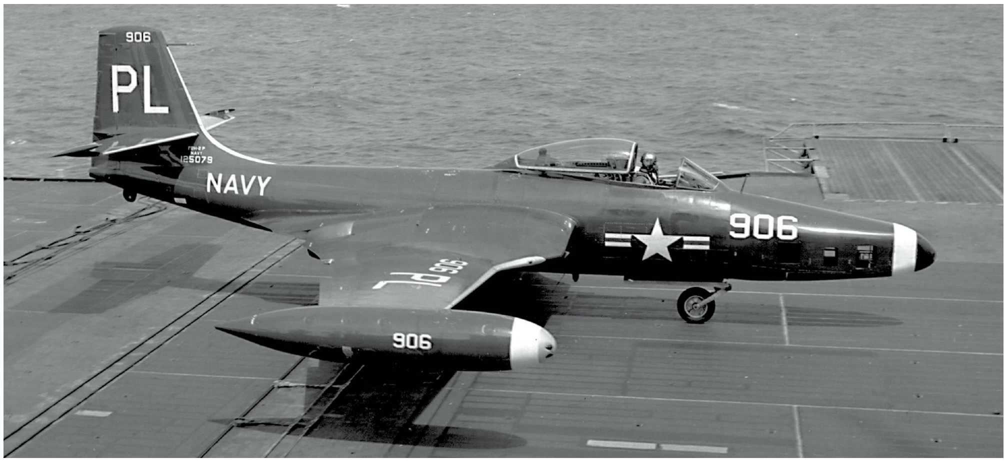
It would not be until *Essex* deployed to the Korean War zone with CVG-5 on board that the F2H-2P began combat operations, and the carrier air group had initially included only three F9F-2P Panthers of VC-61 Detachment B (led by Lt S L Jaynes) within its complement of aircraft. *Essex* joined TF 77 in August 1951, and it was during the ship's third line period – 26 December 1951 to 1 February 1952 – that the detachment added two F2H-2Ps to its line-up, giving CVG-5 the opportunity to evaluate both types side-by-side in the same carrier air group. As detailed in the previous chapter, CVG-5 had also given the F2H-2 its combat debut, with VF-172, during this deployment.

'Two F2H-2P photo aircraft were ordered to this group during the operating period and were found to be a great improvement over the F9F-2P because of the types of cameras installed', CAG Cdr Marshall U Beebe wrote in his report. 'The F2H-2P has one K-38 camera with a 36-inch focal length and two K-17s, one with a 12-inch focal length and one with a 6-inch focal length. The F9F-2P has two K-17s with 12-inch focal length'.

Typically, a photo-reconnaissance mission was conducted by a single aircraft, with two fighters as escorts. When available, Banshee fighters were the preferred escorts. Reconnaissance missions went looking for potential targets, including transportation routes, supply depots, fortifications, industrial facilities and personnel concentrations. Photo-reconnaissance aircraft also flew bomb-damage assessments after strikes.

Hallion wrote in his history *The Naval Air War in Korea* that the Banshee excelled at high-altitude photography. With its 36-in. focal-length cameras, the aircraft could photograph in one run at 15,000 ft the same area that three F9F-2Ps could cover in three passes at 5000 ft. With this altitude and capability advantage, the F2H-2P was able to conduct missions more thoroughly and at less risk. Hallion cited an action report that stated, 'The F2H-2P has proven to be the finest photo plane in service. Its speed, maneuverability, visibility, range and endurance far exceed any other fighter photo [plane] in Navy use'.

The success enjoyed by the F2H-2P resulted in more being deployed, and they served on a wider range of carriers than the fighter variants during the war. *Valley Forge* deployed to the war with ATG-1 (commanded by Cdr C H Crabill) embarked on 15 October 1951, and its photo-reconnaissance needs were initially fulfilled by the F9F-2Ps of VC-61 Detachment H. However, as with *Essex*'s VC-61 Detachment B, *Valley Forge*'s photo-reconnaissance detachment also received an augment of F2H-2Ps late in the deployment.



F2H-2P BuNo 125079 of VC-62 Detachment 5 taxis forward on the flightdeck of *Midway* after landing back on board the carrier in late August 1952 during operations in the North Atlantic. VC-62 provided photo-reconnaissance detachments for all Atlantic Fleet carriers. Unlike their VC-61 counterparts in the Pacific Fleet, VC-62's aircraft often used modexes with three digits in the 900 series and sometimes wore the tail code of the host carrier air group. The unit deployed only one detachment to the Korean War zone, with CVG-4 on board *Lake Champlain*. Detachment 44 flew missions during the last two months of the conflict and then helped to monitor the armistice until the carrier departed for home (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

Valley Forge was the first carrier to deploy with an ATG instead of a CVG. The US Navy was limited by Congress to a certain number of carrier air group staffs, so it created ATGs in order to get around this restriction – they were essentially ad hoc CVGs. The carrier's commanding officer, Capt Oscar Pedersen, explained the ATG concept in his deployment report;

"An Air Task Group is a carrier air group composed of trained squadrons equipped with specific aircraft to accomplish required operations in the theater to which deployed. Besides allowance and types of assigned aircraft, it differs from the conventional air group in that the air group commander has a minimum administrative staff composed of collateral duty officers from the squadrons. This, plus ship assistance in administrative personnel, permits him to give maximum attention to operations.

'With this new type of organization, Air Task Group ONE has operated in an outstandingly effective manner during the ship's present deployment. Prior to deployment, the group did not train or operate as a group. This group showed that an Air Task Group can be organized on short notice and deployed as an effective combat unit. The air [task] group concept is sound in that it provides carrier aviation with important flexibility which must be available if Naval Aviation is to continue to progress.'

Valley Forge and ATG-1 returned home on 3 July 1952. The F2H-2Ps of VC-61 Detachment H proved to be so successful that Pedersen recommended in his report that 'the F2H-2 photo plane be used for aerial reconnaissance purposes on all CV-9 type carriers'.

On the last day of 1951, *Philippine Sea*, with CVG-11 embarked, deployed to the war. Like CVG-5 on board *Essex* and ATG-1 on board *Valley Forge*, CVG-11, led by Cdr J W Onstott, deployed with F9F-2Ps in its VC-61 detachment – in this case Detachment C under the command of Lt R L Nail. By the time *Philippine Sea* commenced its third line period on 21 June 1952, Detachment C's F9F-2Ps had been replaced by F2H-2Ps. Near the end of the line period, on 6 July, the vessel conducted carrier qualification for three F2H-2P pilots of Marine Photographic Squadron (VMJ) 1, which operated from Pohang (K-3), in Korea. On 18 July, before leaving the war zone and heading for home, *Philippine Sea* transferred five F2H-2Ps and pilots from Detachment C and VMJ-1 to *Essex*. *Philippine Sea*'s deployment ended on 8 August 1952.

Bon Homme Richard, under the command of Capt Paul W Watson, deployed for the war on 20 May 1952 with CVG-7 embarked. The group, commanded by Cdr Gaylord B Brown, included VC-61 Detachment N and its three F9F-2Ps under the command of Lt Carl H Yeagle. The detachment was the only Pacific Fleet unit assigned to CVG-7 for the deployment.

VC-61's Detachment N had an unusual deployment in that it operated three types of aircraft over the length of the cruise, and switched types thrice. When *Bon Homme Richard* pulled into Yokosuka on 20 August, the VC-61 detachment was temporarily based ashore at NAS Atsugi for a ten-day period to make the transition from the F9F-2P to the F2H-2P. The Banshee was familiar to only one person in the detachment – Lt Yeagle, who, nevertheless, had no flying time in the aircraft. Two maintenance personnel from VF-71 who had experience of working on the Banshee were loaned to the detachment as Fleet Air Service Squadron 11 facilitated the aircraft swap.

As Capt Watson recorded in his deployment report;

'Flight operations were delayed for three days while 120-hour checks and de-preservations were accomplished, and the first aircraft reached an "up" status on 24 August. As each plane was readied for flight, it remained airborne almost continuously from sunrise to sunset on such varied missions as familiarization, cruise control, photo and FCLP [field carrier landing practice], combining, when conditions permitted, as many mission combinations as possible between take-off and landing.'

The five pilots of Detachment N were all FCLP-qualified with an average of 13 hours in the Banshee when they returned to the carrier. On 30 August, three F2H-2Ps were flown to Kisarazu, Japan, to be loaded onto barges for transfer *to Bon Homme Richard*.

During the carrier's second period on the line (2 to 27 September), Detachment N's pilots flew 75 combat missions in their Banshees. One of those missions was singled out by Watson when, on 22 September, Lt Yeagle's F2H-2P was damaged by 37 mm flak south of Wonsan while photographing flak positions;

'The shell exploded in the cockpit's right console, demolishing all electrical connections in Lt Yeagle's Banshee and scattering shrapnel throughout the cockpit. The canopy glass was blasted out, with the shattering pieces cutting his face. Shrapnel buried in his right arm, fracturing his right elbow and causing profuse bleeding. Part of the control cables were sheared by the blast and only limited control of the aircraft was possible. His parachute was shredded in several places.'

Yeagle's fighter escort, Lt Cronin, refused to land first at the one-runway airfield Kangnung (K-18), even though he knew a crash-landing of the photo-Banshee might close the runway. Watson continues;

'Upon arrival at K-18, Lt Yeagle, weakened by loss of blood and suffering from pain from his broken arm, exhausted all means to lower his landing gear and flaps. Bracing his useless right arm between the stick and his stomach, he brought his plane in for a necessarily fast, wheels up, no flaps approach. With precision he brought his crippled Banshee over the strip, flying it into a smooth emergency landing. Sliding down the Marston matting, he displayed cool headwork to the very end by skidding his aircraft off the left side of the runway surface to allow his escort, dangerously low on fuel, a clear strip for landing.

'The entire incident was a sterling example of combat flying at its best, graphically illustrating the teamwork, precision, and courage that has made carrier Naval Aviation what it is today.'

Because of his wounds, Yeagle had to give up the detachment, and Lt B R Smith became the new officer-in-charge.

Upon *Bon Homme Richard*'s return to Yokosuka on 30 September, VC-61 Detachment N transferred its Banshees to VC-61 Detachment G (assigned to CVG-101) on board *Oriskany* and reverted to F9F-2Ps for the next line period, which would turn out to be the last carrier deployment of the F9F-2P. Watson bemoaned the return of the photo-Panthers;

'Due to the reversion from the Banshee to the F9F-2P aircraft the photo pilots were again required to fly at hazardously low altitudes over mountainous Korean terrain. This was necessary due to the fact that the F9F-2P was limited to a maximum focal length of 12 inches in order to produce the required scale photography suitable for photo interpretation.

'The entire Kojo invasion area was mapped at 5000 ft and completely analyzed by photo interpreters for all guns, trenches, firing positions, barbed wire, mine fields, vehicles, bunkers, storage, troops and other installations. Photo coverage at a scale of 1:5000 of the rail routes Hazel and Helen, which lie in the heart of Wonsan Valley, was also requested, and flown at 5000 ft.

'These missions are well-known to be very hazardous in straight and level flight. When aircraft that can carry a camera of greater focal length than 12 inches are available in the area, it is recommended that they [F2H-2Ps] be assigned to these heavy flak areas in lieu of F9F-2P aircraft.'

While *Bon Homme Richard* was in port before its final line period, the detachment made the transition to the F9F-5P. It would be the first combat deployment of the latest iteration of the photo-Panther.

Detachment N's experience led Watson to conclude that 'on the basis of this unit's experience with three different types of photo-configured aircraft, it is recommended that all photo units deploying to WESTPAC should be self-supporting and capable of performing their own aircraft maintenance. The advantage of a small, integral group, completely familiar with several aircraft cannot be over-emphasized.'

He also noted that the 'F9F-2P was an O&R [overhaul and repair] modification of an F9F-2B, and was the best interim photo plane available until the arrival of the F2H-2P and F9F-5P. In general, the Banshee is a far superior photo plane to the F9F-5P. Operationally, it has greater range, better stability as a photo platform, and excellent carrier handling characteristics. Photographically, it has greater versatility with three rotatable camera bays versus two bays, only one of which is rotatable in the F9F-5P'.

Watson also noted that the camera bays on the Banshee were 'very accessible on the deck', pointing out that it 'takes only one man to load and unload cameras on the deck, whereas on an F9F-5P two men were required, along with a ladder, to load and unload'.

CAG Brown commented in his deployment report a change in the photo-mission concept of operations;

'A second photo plane assigned as photo escort cannot be effective as both an escort and a photo reconnaissance plane simultaneously. It is strongly recommended that a jet fighter be assigned as photo escort with each photo plane regardless of the number of TARCAPs and other friendly aircraft in the area.'

Watson singled out VC-61 Detachment N for special praise, saying that it had 'shown from the earliest days of the cruise a high degree of proficiency in spite of two changes of aircraft type. It has successfully carried out photographic missions over the most dangerous flak areas in East Korea, making repeated runs at constant altitude, course, and speed, and the quality of their performance is responsible to no small degree for the successful operations of the Air Group and Task Force in general'.

Bon Homme Richard and CVG-7 returned home on 8 January 1953.

Essex returned to the war with ATG-2, commanded by Cdr J G Daniels, with VC-61 Detachment I on board under the leadership of Lt T L Neilson.

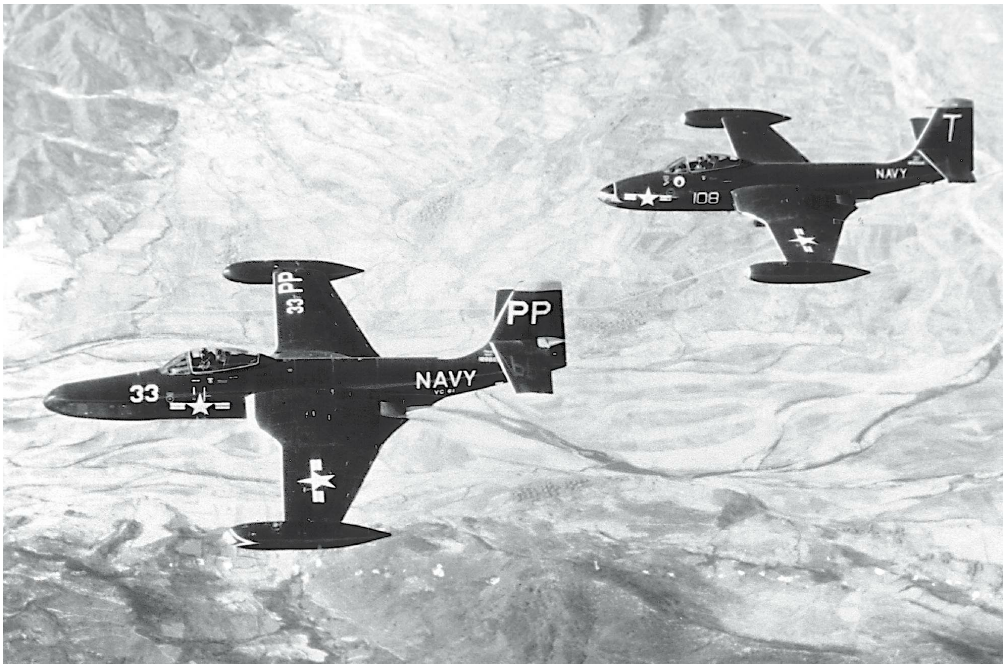
Deploying on 16 June 1952, *Essex* stopped in Subic Bay, in the Philippines, to onload five F2H-2Ps from *Philippine Sea* and offload 12 F9Fs and four AD-4s. The carrier arrived in the war zone on 18 July, and the following day its F2H-2Ps flew their first photo-reconnaissance sorties over Korea. ATG-2, however, did not commence full-strength combat operations until 1 August following a port call in Yokosuka. During its first line period, the det flew 88 sorties.

As with previous photo-Banshee deployments, VC-61 Detachment I and the F2H-2P made a good impression. 'The work of VC-61 Team ITEM [I] has been excellent', Daniels stated in his report. He noted that escorting Banshee photo-reconnaissance aircraft with F9F Panther fighters posed no problems, although it did limit the range of the F2H-2P. He recommended that efforts be made to launch Banshees and their escorts simultaneously for two reasons – 'a quicker rendezvous and attendant fuel saving' and 'to prevent hold-back rings from being thrown into F2H intakes; two engine changes were required due to this reason'.

Daniels wrote that a 'loose wing position for photo escorts has proven satisfactory for F9F escorts, with frequent and shallow weaves directly astern while in the photo run. Speed, surprise and terrain are used to advantage, and are completely effective. No enemy air opposition has been encountered to date'. He also praised the photo-reconnaissance Banshee;

'The F2H-2P has proven to be the finest photo plane in service. Its speed, maneuverability, visibility, range, and endurance far exceed any other photo fighter in Navy use. The present photo nose configuration incorporates many features – i.e., accessibility, design, repair, heating, etc. – desired and required for combat photography. Due to the longer focal length cameras afforded by this configuration, largescale photography is possible at 10,000 ft and above.'

During *Essex*'s second line period, which began on 5 September, VC-61 Det I flew 100 sorties. On 30 September, F2H-2P BuNo 128858 was hit by small-arms fire in the starboard tip tank. The third line period, which began on 13 November, included 33 photo sorties but was marred by the loss of a VC-61 Banshee. The F2H-2P (BuNo unknown) went into the sea as the result of a malfunctioning catapult, with the pilot being rescued. VC-61 Det I flew 68 sorties during the fourth line period, which began on 7 December 1952 and ended on 12 January 1953. Banshee BuNo 128826 was damaged by 37 mm AAA but safely made it back to *Essex*.



An F2H-2P from VC-61 Detachment F is escorted on a photo-reconnaissance mission over North Korea by a VF-11 F2H-2 on 24 December 1952. Both aircraft were embarked in *Kearsarge* as part of CVG-101. The fighter escort was to provide protection for the unarmed photo-Banshee in the event of an interception by MiG-15s. The F2H-2 was the preferred escort over the F9F Panther thanks to its longer range and superior performance at high-altitude (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

Cdr Daniels noted that the VC-61 detachment was innovative with a field modification that improved the capabilities of the photo-reconnaissance Banshee;

‘This unit has successfully located the K-18 and K-38 24-in. camera in the aft bay, so that it can be rotated from the cockpit from the vertical position to any of the four oblique positions. The use of a 24-in. camera with a 9 x 18-in. negative offers the advantages of increased scale, longer slant ranges and the addition of orientation coverage to pinpoint obliques.’

Essex returned to its homeport of San Diego with ATG-2 on 6 February 1953.

Kearsarge, with CVG-101 (later re-designated CVG-14, as detailed in the previous chapter) which included the F2H-2s of VF-11 and the F2H-2Ps of VC-61 Detachment F, began its war deployment on 11 August 1952. The VC-61 det was under the command of Lt Cdr R M Garvey. The detachment flew 80 sorties during its first line period, with F2H-2P BuNo 128866 being damaged in its port engine by AAA on 17 September. During the 59 sorties of the third line period, F2H-2P BuNo 128861 was damaged in the starboard wing stub by AAA on 21 November. The detachment flew 42 sorties during its final line period.

CAG Cdr H P Ady noted of the VC-61 detachment that ‘all assigned missions were well within the capabilities of both pilots and planes. The F2H-2P is an excellent photo plane, and with its range, speed and endurance can, if conditions warrant, adjust to a two-hour schedule very easily. Upon returning to the ship after the usual hour-and-a-half mission, approximately 2000 lbs of fuel remain. The camera facilities of the Banshee are very satisfactory, and although the Beach Reconnaissance and Tri-metrogen mounts have not been called for as of yet, it is believed they will, when used, be as efficient as the general recce mount presently installed. The K-38 camera with the 9 x 18-in. negative is vastly superior to the K-17 camera, and is considered more satisfactory than the K-18 or the K-18B’.

Oriskany deployed to the war on 15 September 1952. On board was CVG-102, led by Cdr G P Chase. VC-61 provided Detachment G, with Lt J F Grosser as officer in charge. Before arriving off Korea, *Oriskany* operated in the vicinity of Formosa (Taiwan) in support of the Chinese Nationalist government. Joining the carrier air group were three aircraft and pilots of VMJ-1. On 30 October, the VC-61 and VMJ-1 detachments flew 11 special photo-reconnaissance missions ‘which accomplished 100 per cent of assigned targets’, Chase wrote in his deployment report. It is likely that these missions involved overflight of the Chinese mainland. VMJ-1 would be back over China later.

Over Korea, VC-61 Detachment G flew 22 sorties and suffered no combat losses, but Banshee BuNo 126692 was lost on 15 November when its radios and instruments failed while the aircraft was above an overcast. The pilot, Lt D I Kinney, ejected and parachuted down in the vicinity of Kangnung (K-18) airfield and was rescued uninjured. For the remainder of the deployment, VC-61 Detachment G flew its sorties over Korea without incident. Chase noted that the detachment’s photo-reconnaissance Banshees were routinely operating with tip tanks. During the deployment, the detachment also acquired at least one F9F-5P and flew both Banshees and Panthers for a time.

ATG-1, under the command of Cdr A L Whitney, returned to the war embarked in *Boxer* on 30 March 1953. On board again with ATG-1 was VC-61 Detachment H, led by Lt C Hutchings, equipped with three F2H-2Ps. *Boxer*’s commanding officer, Capt M B Gurney, noted that of the trio of Panther-equipped units within ATG-1, the F9F-5s of VF-111 were preferable to the F9F-2s of VF-52 and VF-151 as escorts for the F2H-2Ps. This detachment flew 96 sorties through the end of the hostilities in July and the monitoring of the armistice that followed. Lt Daniel R Paul was killed in action when F2H-2P BuNo 128879 crashed into the sea while in the landing pattern on 23 July. *Boxer* returned home on 28 November.

When *Lake Champlain*, commanded by Capt G T Mundorff, deployed on 26 April 1953 with Banshee-equipped VF-22 and VF-62 in CVG-4, the carrier air group's photo detachment was the only one from VC-62 to conduct operations during the Korean War. Detachment 44, led by Lt E D Kimble, included three F2H-2Ps and completed 67 photo-reconnaissance sorties through to the armistice. *Lake Champlain* returned home on 4 December, the vessel being the last carrier to have deployed to the war.

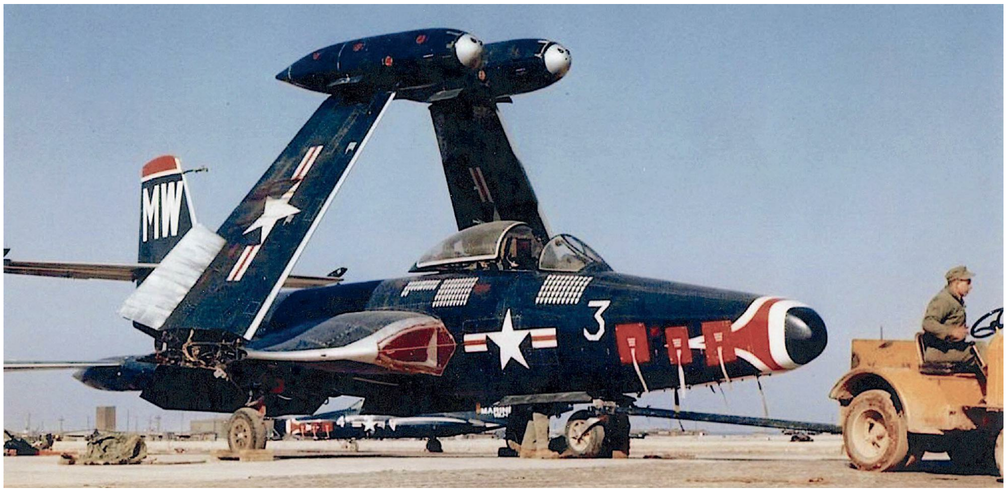
VC-61 detachments flew more than 5000 sorties during the conflict. Only three VC-61 F2H-2Ps and one pilot were lost to all causes. VC-62, with its single 'Banjo' detachment, suffered no losses.

MARINE PHOTO-BANSHEES

Although the US Marine Corps' aviation involvement during the Korean War was heavy, it was devoid of Banshee fighters. The need for a tactical reconnaissance aircraft became evident, however, so two photographic squadrons were formed in 1952. VMJ-1 (tail code MW) was activated at Pohang on 25 February 1952 under the command of Maj Robert R Reed as a unit of Marine Aircraft Group (MAG) 33 of the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW).

The squadron was initially equipped with five F2H-2Ps, one F9F-2P, one F4U-5P and four F7F-2Ps as a result of a 'consolidation of Marine reconnaissance aircraft previously attached to 1st MAW's Headquarters Squadron and MAG-33 headquarters since July 1950', according to the website of the Marine Corps Reconnaissance Aviation Association, with posts written by retired Col H Wayne Whitten. Although the VMF squadrons in Korea operated Panthers, the Banshee became the star of the US Marine Corps' photo-reconnaissance operation.

On the East Coast, VMJ-2 (tail code MT) was activated on 15 September 1952 at MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina. According to Whitten, the photo-reconnaissance aircraft of the 2nd MAW were operated by the 2nd MAW Headquarters Squadron (HEDRON) 2 after VMP-354 was de-activated in late 1949. In 1950, the HEDRON requested to assign an F4U-5P photo-reconnaissance detachment to CVG-17 on board *Coral Sea* for a Mediterranean deployment from 9 September 1950 to 1 February 1951. Later, in April 1953, *Coral Sea* and CVG-8 deployed to the Mediterranean with a HEDRON-2 detachment of F2H-2Ps and F2H-2Bs (see **Appendices**). When VMJ-2 was activated, it absorbed the photo-reconnaissance aircraft assigned to HEDRON-2, including a few F2H-2Ps. VMJ-2 did not deploy to the Korean War zone.



A VMJ-1 F2H-2P is towed at Pohang, the aircraft displaying a set of mission markings. VMJ-1's Banshees were some of the most colourful to see action in Korea with the US Marine Corps. Note the mud on the tyres of the Banshee that the Marston matting was designed to minimise. VMJ-1 proved to be a star reconnaissance unit, with the capabilities of its photo-Banshees always being in high demand with theatre commanders (*Peter Davies Collection*)

VMJ-1 operated in the skies over Korea largely in response to missions assigned by the Fifth Air Force, and was prized for the capabilities of its photo-reconnaissance Banshees. The latter were usually able to provide bomb-damage assessment within one hour of a strike.

Communist MiG-15s were always a potential threat to photo-reconnaissance jets, and VMJ-1 had encounters. After several of these, TF 77 doubled its CAPs and sent photo-reconnaissance missions over airfields in North Korea from early 1952. The MiGs responded on 10 March with an attack on a pair of VMJ-1 F2H-2Ps after their photo runs, shooting up both aircraft despite their manoeuvring. The two Banshees made it back to their base, although the jet flown by the squadron CO, Lt Col R D Gould, was so badly damaged that it was stricken on site.

Naval Aviation Pilots (NAPs) of VMJ-1 pose alongside a squadron F2H-2P at Pohang. They are, from left to right, MSgts James R Todd, Sam Cooper, LeRoy Copland, Marv Myers and Lowell T 'Red' Truex. The squadron had an unusually large contingent of these enlisted pilots when the trend toward officer-only Naval Aviators continued toward completion in the 1970s. VMJ-1 pilots survived several encounters with MiG-15s (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

MSgt Ed Chestnut, one of VMJ-1's many enlisted pilots, is credited with saying, 'Sure, an F2H will outrun a MiG, if you don't mind putting the nose down and popping a few rivets!' After such close encounters, USAF F-86 Sabres were assigned to fly cover for the photo-reconnaissance Banshees that flew up to the Yalu River. According to retired Maj Al Bevilacqua, on one VMJ-1 mission over the Suhio Reservoir hydroelectric powerplant, two F2H-2Ps were escorted by two full squadrons of Sabres, the latter probably looking for the Banshees to draw MiGs into a fight.

VMJ-1 had more enlisted pilots – called Naval Aviation Pilots (NAPs) – than any other US Marine Corps squadron at the time, according to Whitten. Naval Aviation historian Peter Mersky wrote in his book *Marine Corps Aviation Since 1912*;

'MSgt Lowell T Truex had made his photo runs against installations near the Yalu River in 1952, thinking that his F-86 escort would look out for any communist fighters which might try to come after him. However, as he looked around, he found that the Sabres were nowhere to be seen, and he also spotted a gaggle of MiG-15s taking off across the river. Hurriedly, he finished his photo runs and ran for home. Truex later found out that the F-86s had been watching from above, had the MiGs in sight and were, in fact, ready to jump the Chinese fighters had they come after the Banshee. Truex later commented;

'"My memories of the photo unit, which became a squadron during my tour, and all the plankowners, are good ones. We were completely self-contained and operated with field equipment from the well-point, water tank to the generators. The technicians were all superior guys, who worked with energy and diligence."'

Mersky also recalled two of Truex's squadronmates;

'MSgt Calvin R Duke, who laid claim to being the oldest Marine NAP in Korea, was set upon by two MiGs near Chosin. In a dogfight that went from 10,000 ft up to 30,000 ft, Duke outmaneuvered the communist fighters and ran for home at 600 mph.

'MSgt James R Todd was the squadron's high-mission man, completing 101 photo missions before rotation home. During his time in Korea, Todd flew 51 reconnaissance missions in Banshees, ten in F9F-2Ps, 23 in F7F-3Ps, 13 in F4U-5Ps and four escort missions in F4U-4Bs. As he recalled, "The F4U-4B was used for armed escort only. The rest of the time, we relied on a 0.38 pistol, a can of film and a lot of speed."

'Like many others, Todd had been a second lieutenant in World War 2, although he had just missed seeing combat service when the war ended, having spent much of his post-winging time as an instructor. Mustered out in September 1946, he returned two months later, resigning his first lieutenant's commission and re-enlisting as a private. He was immediately advanced to master sergeant and sent to El Toro, then to Pensacola to learn the art of aerial reconnaissance at the Naval School of Photography.'

MSgt James R Todd, an enlisted NAP, boards his F2H-2P in June 1952. A former second lieutenant who re-enlisted as a private after World War 2 and was quickly advanced to the rank of master sergeant, Todd flew 101 photo-reconnaissance missions over Korea (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

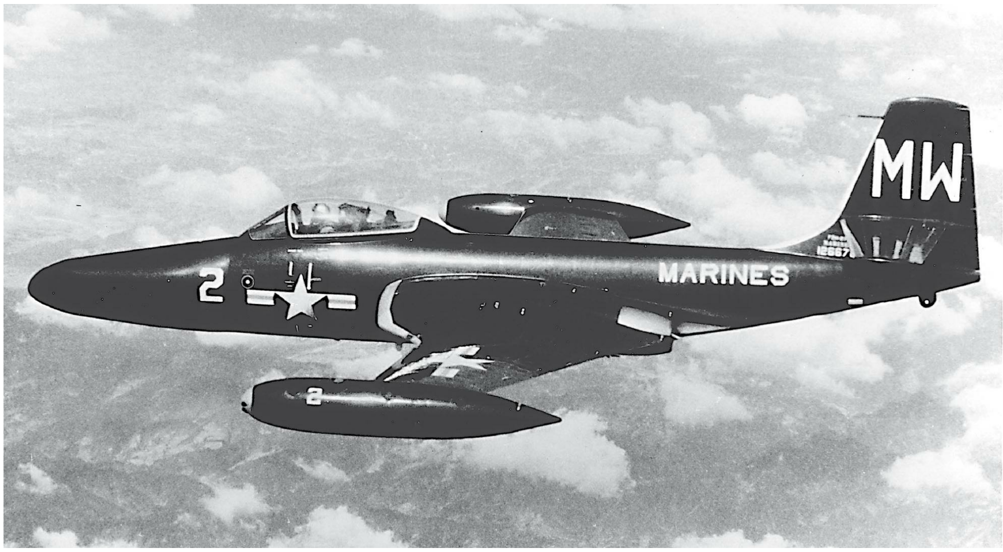
VMJ-1 flew 5025 sorties during its 18 months in the frontline. The squadron provided about 50 per cent of the Fifth Air Force's photo-reconnaissance coverage during this period, exposing enough film – 793,000 ft – to 'circle the earth at the equator six-and-a-half times', Hallion wrote. VMJ-1 lost only one Banshee in combat, F2H-2P BuNo 125684 being downed by AAA on 29 August 1952. Its pilot, Capt Robert E Benton, survived with injuries. Author Douglas E Campbell featured a description of Benton's loss in his book *US Navy, US Marine Corps and MATS Aircraft Lost During the Korean War*;

'With his jet engines already cut, the Marine photo pilot was still traveling at 185 mph. His left aileron was almost shot away and his hydraulic system knocked out. His speed brakes and flaps wouldn’t drop. The landing gear wouldn’t go down. Capt Robert E Benton, a MAG-33 photo pilot, was making a low, long approach with his flak-battered jet on a Korean crash strip. He hit the strip hard and bounced. Fire broke out in the rear of the fuselage. He hit the ground again and skidded 800 ft into a two-ton grain spreader, tearing off the left tip tank and several feet of the wing. Then, a whip-like spin pitched his jet into a seven-foot ditch, [with] the impact sending Capt Benton’s crash helmet out of the cockpit. There was a small explosion under the instrument panel.

‘Untangling himself from his harness straps, the Marine pilot plunged out of the burning aircraft, stumbled behind an embankment, and waited for the expected fuel explosion. It never came. The crash crew was on the job to put out what was left of the battered jet. Capt Benson, in prayerful relief, patted the solid ground. Although the nose of the jet was smashed and battered, the valuable cameras and film that had taken important pictures of enemy installations were intact.

‘Benton’s jet had been hit by flak on a mission near the Yalu River. He had been escorted home by a Sabre jet which had shielded him against an attack by a flight of MiGs. The whole hectic mission – the flak, the MiGs, the crash landing – left Capt Benson with only a bruised knee, a cut hand and a sprained back. When he came back and looked at the battered jet, all he could say was, “I still can’t believe I came out of it alive”.’

Another VMJ-1 photo-reconnaissance Banshee (BuNo unknown) was written off after its landing gear collapsed at the end of a mission. The pilot, Capt Louis Conti, survived the crash-landing unscathed.



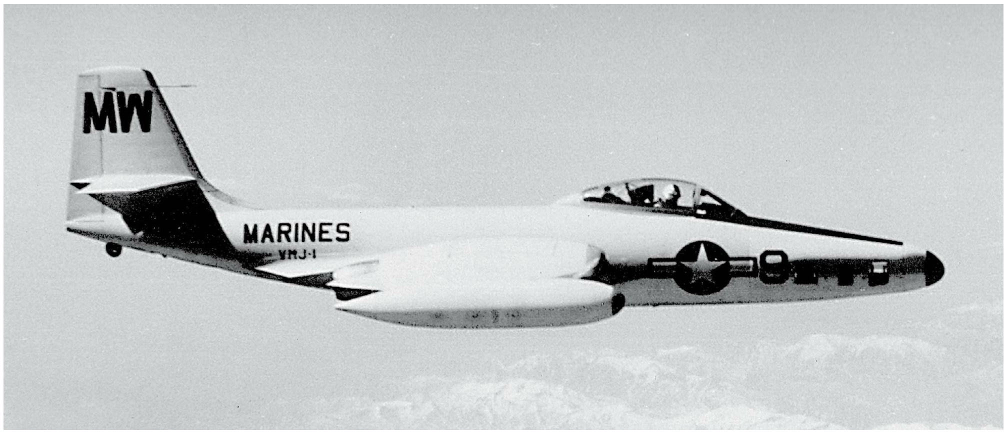
VMJ-1 F2H-2P BuNo 126676 cruises over Korea on 8 July 1952. Searching for enemy forces in the mountainous terrain of northern Korea was a never-ending task for photo-reconnaissance pilots during the war. VMJ-1 was the only US Marine Corps unit to operate the Banshee in the Korean War. BuNo 126676 subsequently served with VC-62 from 1954 (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

As previously mentioned, VMJ-1 had also sent a detachment of three F2H-2Ps and pilots to *Oriskany* for operations off Formosa. These aircraft performed photo-reconnaissance missions alongside the ship's embarked VC-61 Detachment G over the Chinese coastline and possibly inland too on 30 October 1952.

VMJ-1 remained at Pohang for more than a year after the Korean armistice came into effect on 27 July 1953. In November 1954, the squadron came under the command of high-scoring World War 2 ace Lt Col Marion E Carl, who was also one of the US Marine Corps' most experienced jet pilots. Carl, writing in his autobiography (with Barrett Tillman) *Pushing the Envelope*, noted that he had no photo-reconnaissance experience but was selected to address some 'command climate' problems in the squadron. Carl wrote that the VMJ-1 pilots were flying missions 'on a makeshift schedule, almost any way they pleased. They had been flying recon missions up the northeast coast of Korea, staying three miles offshore, looking more for shipping than for anything on land. They would then swing seaward and return over open water.

'I decided that wasn't how I wanted to do things. I told the pilots to approach from out to sea and come back along the coast in case they encountered any opposition. But I learned that they flew the next mission as usual, so I called in the flight leader and grounded him. He had been selected for major and I wanted to hold up his warrant, but I was told that wasn't possible unless I put him up for a general court martial. That didn't make much sense to me, so the situation stabilized. And, more importantly, the pilots had finally learned that they had a CO with some experience (this was my third command) and that the squadron would be run my way.'

Post-armistice, the Korean peninsula was relatively quiet, and Carl recalled that some of the boredom was relieved for the VMJ-1 pilots by having them fly air combat manoeuvring dogfights with a locally based FJ-2 Fury squadron. 'It wasn't what photo birds were supposed to do, but it did help keep things interesting'.



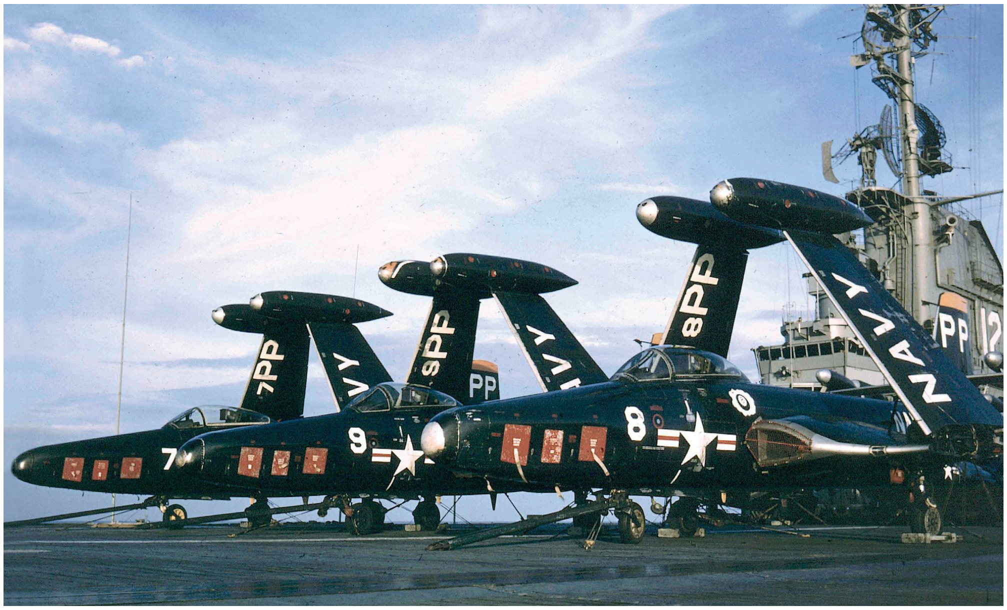
A VMJ-1 F2H-2P painted in the gull grey-over-white scheme that was ushered in during the mid-1950s flies over snow-covered mountains in South Korea. VMJ-1 continued to fly missions over Korea from NAS Atsugi after the conflict had ended, as the unit had been tasked with helping to monitor the armistice. It also undertook potentially hazardous sorties over China from Taiwan and the Soviet Union from Japan. The squadron was de-activated on 31 July 1958 after it merged with VMC-1 to form VMCJ-1 (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

In January 1955, VMJ-1 moved from Pohang to NAS Atsugi, which would be the unit's home for the rest of its existence. Although little is known of the operations flown from here, VMJ-1 flew high-altitude reconnaissance missions over the eastern Soviet Union, including Sakhalin Island, during the 1950s. In May 1955, VMJ-1 would return to Chinese skies following intelligence reports of a communist Chinese build-up in Fukien Province, across the Taiwan Strait from the Republic of China, preceding a possible invasion. VMJ-1 was assigned the task of confirming whether the build-up was real.

Carl and a wingman flew to the Taiwanese capital, Taipei, for a conference in Keelung, and later to Tainan airfield to inspect its facilities. On 10 May VMJ-1 flew to Tainan, with its personnel and equipment being brought in aboard four R4Q Flying Boxcars. VMJ-1 flew missions from 11 May, with the first one proving uneventful. On the 12th, the squadron completed four sorties over China, with Carl flying one of them. The missions were monitored by the radars on board the US Navy's WV-2 Warning Star aircraft of Airborne Early Warning Squadron (VW) 1, as well as a Nationalist Chinese radar on Makung Island in the Pescadores Islands. The Banshees flew at 40,000 ft – the altitude needed to meet the scale requirements of the photos, but also a ceiling at which the engines created contrails, depriving the mission of covertness. Carl recounted his sortie;

'My wingman and I were probably inland only 30 to 40 miles, stretching our necks in all directions, when all of a sudden I saw two MiGs break into the contrails back at "seven o'clock" some 5000 ft below. I promptly put my nose down, turned into them, and met them head-on.

'As soon as I passed the MiGs, I flipped over into a split-S, popped my speed brakes and went straight down right to the deck. The old F2H was really bucking. I leveled out and went scooting across the terrain, barely over the treetops and mountain ridges. As soon as I got squared away, I looked back, expecting I had lost my wingman, but he was tucked in so tight I thought he would rub some paint off my airplane. Back on the ground, I mentioned how close he'd been, and he replied, "Colonel, I wasn't about to lose you over Red China!"'


A trio of VC-61 Detachment M F2H-2Ps on the flightdeck of *Hornet* during a round-the-world deployment in 1954. The red covers on the noses of the aircraft protected the glass of the camera ports from flying debris and were removed before flight. A typical photo-reconnaissance detachment consisted of three aircraft. Note the 'eight-ball' artwork beneath the cockpit of the jet in the foreground, inspired by its modex (*Terry Panopalis Collection*)

This close encounter with MiGs led Carl to demand fighters as escorts for future photo-reconnaissance missions. The commander, US Seventh Fleet, Vice-Adm Alfred M Pride, said he could provide some fighters but no pilots, and duly transferred four US Navy F2H-2s to VMJ-1. Carl was the only pilot in the squadron with fighter experience, and his unit had no ordnancemen to load the Banshees' cannon. So, Carl conducted some air-to-air gunnery training and formed an ordnance department – it is not recorded as to whether the F2H-2 fighters were given VMJ-1 markings.

Carl had two other demands that were approved. One was to abandon the 40,000 ft mission altitude in favor of 30,000 ft. 'At 40,000 ft, we're in the contrails, and in certain weather conditions they can see us for 100 miles', Carl noted. 'The other thing is at 40,000 ft our operating envelope is too restricted. We only have 30 knots to play with; if you slow down, you risk stalling and if you go faster, you get into buffet'.

The second demand was a cancellation of an order to remove all identification markings from the Banshees and unit insignia from the pilots' flight suits. 'It was an absurd notion from the practical aspect that anybody could identify us by our aircraft, and certainly none of us resembled the locals across the strait', Carl recalled. 'But more to the point, the order would put us in the status of spies if we were shot down and captured'.

VMJ-1's missions over China also benefitted from the temporary assignment of a US Navy fighter director to the Nationalist radar station on Makung Island. Lt Cdr Bill Hardy, a US Navy ace from World War 2 who was actually serving as Operations Officer on board the seaplane tender USS *Corson* (AVP-37) at the time, was able to provide radar warning for the photo-reconnaissance pilots as they made their runs over Fukien. Carl said he told Hardy, 'Don't try vectoring me, I'll do that myself. Just tell me where the enemy are and I'll avoid them'.

Carl wrote that the new radar on Makung Island could detect a fighter-size aircraft at 260 nautical miles. Even though the VMJ-1 Banshees had their IFF systems removed to avoid them being compromised if captured, Hardy easily discerned between the Banshees and the MiGs, the latter being detected at 20,000 ft. Hardy, who used an UHF radio to warn the Banshee pilots of the presence of bandits, 'kept his comments to an absolute minimum; no call signs and only simple code words to indicate where the MiGs were', Carl wrote. Hardy also recounted one mission that yielded some excitement;

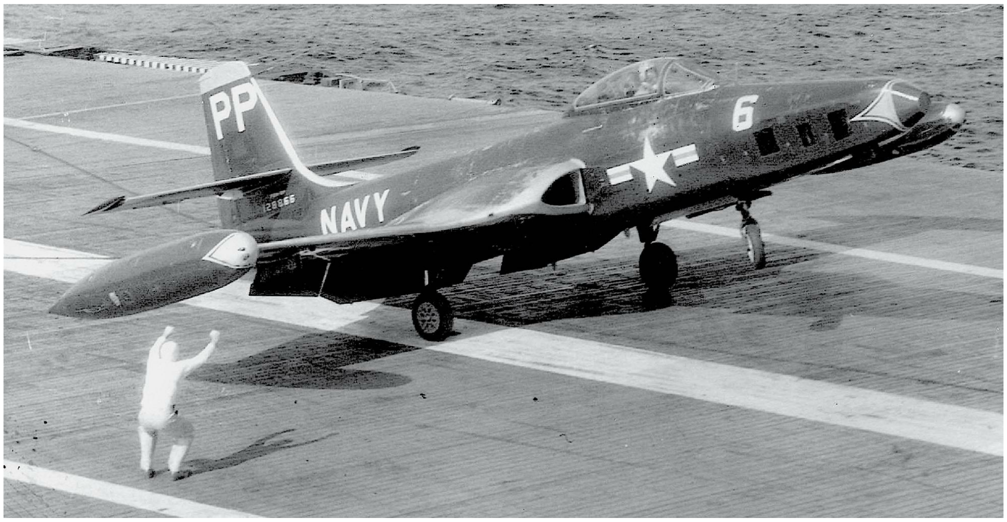
'Marion [Carl] was approaching my site inbound [leading a flight of F2H-2s and a solitary F2H-2P] returning to Tainan, the Nationalists had four F-86s just north, outbound, and the MiGs were inbound way behind Marion at a higher altitude. The ChiNat controllers, apparently thinking the F2Hs were hostile, frantically tried to intercept Marion. But since the Nationalists vectored their F-86s by Morse Code, it took a long time to order a left 180-degree turn, and the Sabres ended up beneath the inbound MiGs, between Makung and the mainland. I heard Marion's flight pass overhead so I ran outside to watch him heading into Tainan, the MiGs retiring in disarray, and the F-86s stolidly heading back from whence they came.'

Carl always flew one of the F2H-2 fighters after the first few missions over Fukien, completing a further 11 sorties over Fukien Province. Bad weather resulted in several missions being cancelled or aborted or proving unproductive. On one mission he flew in early June, as a photo-reconnaissance escort, the F2H-2P Carl was protecting obtained high-quality photographs after 15 minutes over the target. After one final mission on 12 June, the operation was concluded after no evidence was found of a serious build-up of communist Chinese forces to threaten the Nationalist-held islands of Quemoy and Matsu. Having flown 77 missions over China, VMJ-1 returned to Atsugi. The unit continued to fly F2H-2Ps from there for a further three years, the tail code on its jets having changed from MW to YW in June 1957. On 31 July 1958, VMJ-1 was de-activated and merged with VMC-1 to form VMCJ-1.

On the East Coast, VMJ-2 was merged with VMC-2 on 1 December 1955 to form VMCJ-2. By that time its F2H-2Ps had been replaced by F9F-6P and F9F-8P Cougars.

F2H-2P POST-WAR CARRIER SERVICE

The F2H-2P lasted longer in service with carrier air groups than the F2H-2 fighter, which was superseded by the F2H-3 and F2H-4. The success of the F2H-2P led the US Navy to keep it rather than develop an F2H-3P or -4P replacement. As the 1950s ticked by, the dark blue photo-reconnaissance Banshees were resprayed in the same new Non-Specular Light Gull Gray over Gloss Insignia White scheme (officially the standard colours from 23 February 1955) as the other fixed wing aircraft in a carrier air group. None seem to have been given the natural aluminium scheme that featured on some carrier-based fighters in the mid to late 1950s.



VFP-61 F2H-2P BuNo 128866 stops abruptly after trapping back on board *Yorktown* on 5 February 1957 during a carrier qualification period off the coast of southern California. VC-61 had been re-designated VFP-61 on 2 July 1956. This F2H-2P has been modified to allow an additional K-38 camera to shoot forward through a port installed in the tip of the nose cone (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

VC-61 continued to deploy its F2H-2Ps on board carriers to the Western Pacific or around the world. Re-designated Light Photographic Squadron

(VFP) 61 on 2 July 1956, it undertook a total of 22 carrier deployments with Banshees (see **Appendices**). The last of these saw Detachment M spend seven months embarked in USS *Ticonderoga* (CVA-14) with CVG-9 between 16 September 1957 and 25 April 1958.

VC-62 also continued to deploy F2H-2Ps to the Mediterranean, the Western Pacific and around the world, the squadron being re-designated VFP-62 on 2 July 1956. It generated a total of 32 detachments with Banshees (see **Appendices**), the last being to the Mediterranean as part of CVG-17 on board USS *Franklin D Roosevelt* (CVA-42) between 12 July 1957 and 5 March 1958.

The F2H-2P outlasted both the F9F-2P and F9F-5P Panthers and the F9F-6P Cougar. However, the F9F-8P Cougar eventually complemented and then replaced the F2H-2P in both squadrons.

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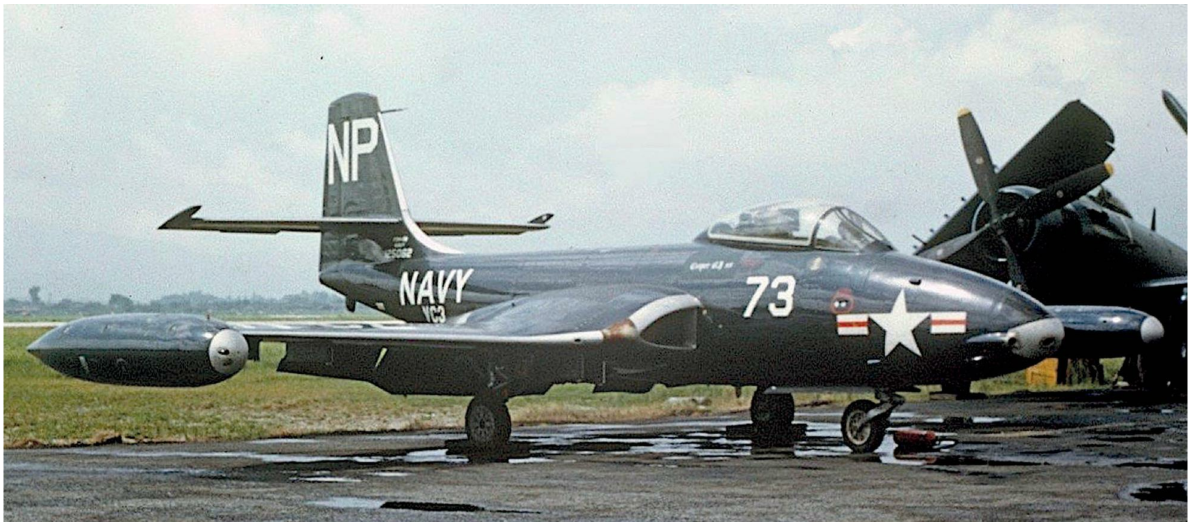
Two VFP-62 F2H-2Ps escort a WV-2 Warning Star aircraft assigned to Weather Reconnaissance Squadron 4 during a July 1956 hurricane-hunting mission from NAS Jacksonville (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

CHAPTER FOUR

NIGHTFIGHTERS AND NUKES

As with its propeller-driven fighters like the F4U Corsair, the US Navy sought to adapt its new jet fighters as nightfighters to eventually replace the F8F-1N and F4U-5N/NL. The Corsair nightfighters were standard on most carriers, flown by detachments of Composite Squadron (VC) 3, which had been established on 2 May 1949 at NAS North Island, California, and then posted to NAS Moffett Field, California, shortly thereafter, and VC-4 'Nightcappers' at NAS Atlantic City, New Jersey. Established on 28 September 1948, VC-4 was the East Coast equivalent of VC-3.



F2H-2B BuNo 125062 of VC-3 was photographed at Itazuke air base, Japan, in 1953. The F2H-2B was the first operationally flexible nuclear-weapon capable tactical jet able to operate from aircraft carriers, although VC-3 did not routinely deploy nuclear-capable Banshees on carriers until the advent of the F2H-3. (*Patrick Martin*)

The F3D Skyknight, with its large nose housing an air-intercept radar, entered service in the early 1950s with VC-3 and VC-4 and deployed with VC-4's Detachment 44 to the Korean War in early 1953 on board *Lake Champlain*. The aircraft's carrier suitability proved to be an issue, since its canted jet exhausts tended to scorch the wooden flightdecks of the vessels it was flying from.

The US Navy also began development of the F2H-2 into a nightfighter during the late 1940s. The aircraft's nose was re-designed to house an APS-

19A radar, resulting in the Banshee's overall length being increased to 42 ft 5.5 in. The installation also forced the designers to move the fighter's four M3 20 mm cannon further aft. The radar display scope was mounted in the cockpit at eye level, and an autopilot was provided to aid all-weather flight at night.

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This VC-4 F2H-2N was photographed in flight during one of the unit's five carrier deployments (all to the Mediterranean) with this mark of Banshee, which took place between January 1951 and July 1953. Despite its limited service, the F2H-2N paved the way for the all-weather F2H-3 and F2H-4, which outlasted the F3D on carrier decks and served until replaced by the F4D Skyray and F3H Demon in the late 1950s (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

The US Navy ordered 14 F2H-2Ns (BuNos 123300-123313) in a single contract. BuNo 123300 made its first flight on 3 February 1950, and the second example completed was assigned to the Naval Air Test Center at Patuxent River, Maryland. One F2H-2N was lost in a mishap, and the rest of the production run was assigned to VC-4. None were issued to VC-3 in the Pacific and no examples were deployed to the Korean War.

VC-4 initially sent the F2H-2N to sea in October 1950 embarked in *Franklin D Roosevelt* for a short cruise in the Caribbean. The 'Nightcappers' despatched its F2H-2Ns on four deployments to the Mediterranean (see **Appendices for VC detachment deployments**), the first being with CVG-6 embarked in *Franklin D Roosevelt* in January 1951. That carrier took another detachment to sea in September 1951 with CVG-17. *Coral Sea* and CVG-4 deployed with Detachment 6 equipped with both F2H-2Ns and F4U-5Ns in April 1952, and eight months later *Midway* deployed with Detachment 5 equipped with both F2H-2N and F3D-2 nightfighters as part of CVG-6. Finally, in January 1953, USS *Tarawa* (CVA-40) deployed in January 1953 with Detachment 32 as part of CVG-10, the unit flying a mix of F2H-2Ns and F4U-5Ns.

It was not quite the end of service for the F2H-2N, however, as some examples, along with nuclear-capable F2H-2Bs (see below), deployed with the F2H-2 day fighters of VF-82 that embarked with CVG-8 in *Lake Champlain* for the carrier's Mediterranean cruise in 1954–55. The advent of the F2H-3 and F2H-4 'Big Banjos' allowed the US Navy to rapidly retire the F2H-2N from VC-4 and to assign the new all-weather, nuclear-capable fighter to both VC-3 and VC-4 (see **Chapter Six**).

NUCLEAR 'BANJO'

In addition to providing the basis for a nightfighter, the F2H-2 was also selected by the US Navy to field its first nuclear capability in a carrier-based tactical jet aircraft. With its high-altitude and long-range capabilities, the Banshee was the best available choice for the new mission.

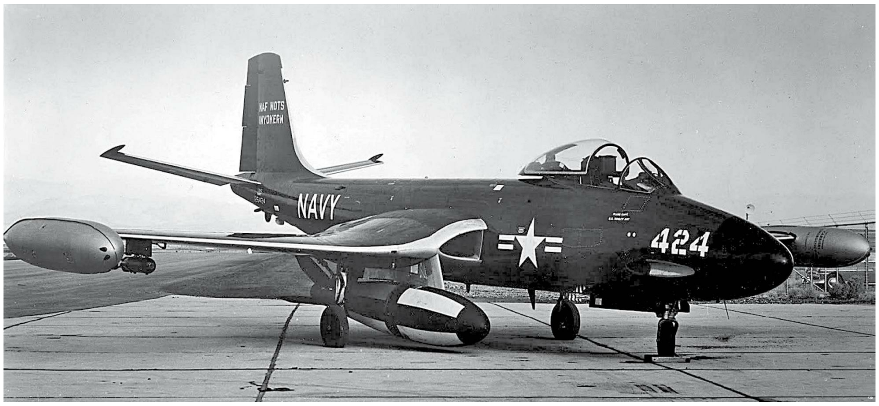
The initial capabilities installed in Lockheed P2V-3C Neptunes and North American AJ Savages failed to adequately fulfil the US Navy's requirements. This led to the F2H-2 being selected for further development, with the result being the F2H-2B, which became the first carrier-based tactical jet to deploy as a nuclear strike aircraft. The F2H-2B, along with the AD-4B Skyraider, added great versatility to the ability of an aircraft carrier to carry out the nuclear strike mission. Given the large size of the existing nuclear weapons and the smallness of the Banshee's airframe, it would prove to be a remarkable accomplishment. A key advancement in the deployment of nuclear weapons from aircraft carriers was a reduction in the size and weight of the bombs.

The nuclear 'Banjo' would be modified to carry two types of nuclear weapons, the Mk 7 and the Mk 8. The former, housing a W-7 Thor warhead, was one of the most widely deployed nuclear weapons in the US arsenal and served longer than many subsequent designs. It was classified as a 'lightweight, low-density, free-fall, high-efficiency, implosion-type weapon', according to the late Chuck Hansen in his book *US Nuclear Weapons – A Secret History*. The Mk 7 was 183 inches long, 30.5 inches in diameter at its maximum, and – with its warhead installed – weighed between 1645 and 1700 lbs. It featured three tail fins, one of which was hinged to be folded to allow ground clearance. It could be carried at speeds of up to Mach 0.82 and altitudes up to 40,000 ft. For a clean separation from the Banshee, the bomb rack had to feature pneumatic or power ejection.

Although the Mk 8 was a physically smaller weapon than the Mk 7, the device was approximately twice its weight at between 3230 and 3280 lbs.

The Mk 8 was 116 inches in length and 14.5 inches in diameter. The weapon's tail ring was 25.25 inches in diameter. The Mk 8 was designed for post-impact detonation (the first nuclear weapon to feature that capability), and it could be fitted with a 16-in. penetrator cap to strike hardened targets.

Because of the sheer size and weight of the Mk 7s and 8, some structural modifications to the F2H-2 were needed to produce a delivery capability in the Banshee. Each weapon exceeded the normal weapons payload of the F2H-2.



Although this photograph features F2H-3 BuNo 126424 rather than an F2H-2B, it illustrates the sheer size of the Mk 7 nuclear weapon that could be carried by the Banshee. The Mk 8 bomb was considerably smaller. This aircraft, assigned to NOTS Inyokern in 1953, was destroyed in a crash at NAS China Lake, California, on 13 July 1955 (*US Navy*)

The large Mk 51 Mod 14 weapon pylon was specially developed for the F2H-2B, this being mounted under the port-side wing root. Different adapters were needed for the attachment points of each type of weapon. The aircraft's wings were strengthened to handle the increased payload. The F2H-2B also had a slot cut into the port flap to accommodate one of the tail fins of the Mk 7. Both weapons required the oleo struts of the Banshee's landing gear to be pressurised to the maximum, thus providing sufficient deck clearance in the case of the Mk 7 and load-carrying capability for the weighty Mk 8.

When the US Navy directed that aerial refuelling capability be added to existing jets where practicable and required on future tactical jets, the F2H-2B became the first so modified. This was especially desirable because the drag and weight of the nuclear weapons reduced the Banshee's range significantly. A refuelling probe was installed on existing F2H-2Bs, with the probe replacing the upper starboard cannon gun tunnel.

According to most sources, 27 F2H-2Bs were built from airframes in the F2H-2 production line, their BuNos being 125030, 031, 054, 056, 058, 059, 061, 062, 064, 066, 067, 069, 070, 500, 502, 504, 506, 650, 651, 653, 654, 656, 657, 659, 660, 661 and 662. Another source notes that three more, BuNos 124940, 941 and 942, were also converted into F2H-2Bs.

Lt Cdr (and future Rear Adm) Edward L 'Whitey' Feightner flew F2H-2Bs as a test pilot with VX-3 at NAS Atlantic City from September 1952. A World War 2 ace, Feightner had achieved nine victories over Japanese aircraft while he was assigned to VF-10 'Grim Reapers' embarked in USS *Enterprise* (CV-6) and, later, the second VF-8 embarked in USS *Bunker Hill* (CV-17). 'I got tagged with "Whitey" by [US Navy ace Lt Cdr] "Butch" O'Hare', Feightner explained during a 2009 interview. 'Everybody had to have a nickname, of course, in those days, and "Butch" was teaching us all to be spear fishermen and I was the only guy in the squadron that didn't get a tan – I got red – so he called me "Whitey". I had blond hair and couldn't tan'.

Feightner was a project pilot for the Vought F7U Cutlass fighter and the F7U solo pilot for the Blue Angels, the US Navy's flight demonstration squadron. Among his projects at VX-3 was the development of nuclear delivery tactics for the AD-4B Skyraider and F2H-2B Banshee. 'We were the pioneers [in nuclear weapons delivery], especially in that low-level delivery business', Feightner said. 'It was done purely by the VX squadrons in the US Navy. Of course, that was the reason they set us up for it. It was interesting work'.

VX-3 was commanded during that fertile time by World War 2 ace Cdr Noel Gayler. Based at NAS Atlantic City, VX-3 had a major role in qualifying the Banshees for their nuclear weapon role and developing the delivery tactics. Feightner was a part of that development;

'Gayler was a really capable guy. He fully understood the mission of the VX squadron. During the years he was there, we made more progress on this very kind of stuff, all of it. We had so many really good projects up there. He was a guy with great vision. He was the perfect guy to be the head of that outfit. We had the Banshee 2, which, in its day, could fly higher and further than its contemporaries. There was a tremendous range on that airplane, and it's the airplane that gave us that true Mk 7 capability. We worked out all of the delivery tactics for the [F2H-2B]: the low-level tactics, no electronics allowed, avoiding the AAA and so forth, with a pop-up [manoeuvre] at the end.

‘That Banshee 2 was a really maneuverable airplane, but it had its limitations. McDonnell built what we ordered, but what we ordered should’ve been 100 per cent stronger. The Banshee was a phenomenal airplane. I remember Noel Gayler and I took off from Atlantic City and we flew down to Jacksonville, circled Florida for something like an hour, and then went 200 miles out to sea and landed aboard and still had fuel enough to go back to Jacksonville. That’s long legs for an airplane of that size. You could get it up to altitude and, of course, it was the first airplane that would go up to about 40,000 ft and stay there. It was a phenomenal machine.’

One of Feightner’s feats with the Banshee was the longest non-stop round-trip flight from an aircraft carrier – a 3220-mile sortie. Together with Gayler and Lt(jg) Mike Ames, all flying F2H-2B Banshees, he launched off *Midway* with Mk 7 nuclear shapes. ‘We were working off of *Midway*, which was 100 miles east of Guantanamo, and we had [the] entire air defense [on] the entire East Coast alerted’, Feightner recalled. ‘They knew we’d be coming during daylight hours sometime, and our target was in Lake Erie. They had a target located out there.

‘We took off from the carrier east of Guantanamo and refuelled from the AJ tankers before we got to the coastline down around St Augustine, in Florida. Then we dropped down to sea level and we flew at treetop level from St Augustine clear up to Lake Erie without being detected. This was a terrible thing for the air defenses in our country at that time. We flew up there, and the first time they ever saw us – it was a really clear day – they saw the bombs go off on the targets.

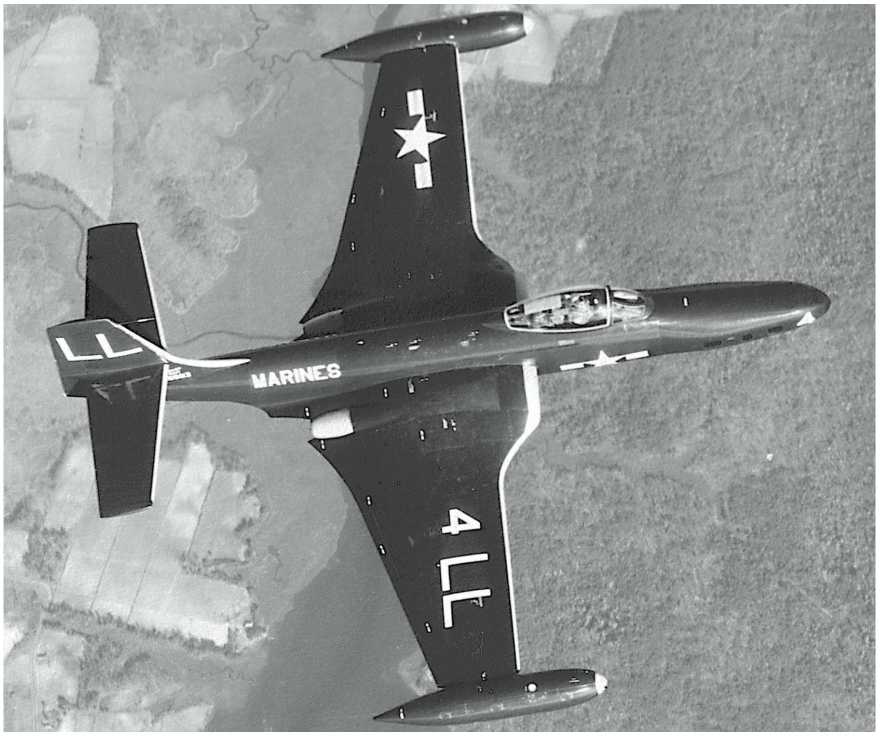
‘All the [Air Force] F-86s and F-89s in the world then came screaming down at us. We built up speed and stayed low and, when they got down to about 5000 ft, we pulled the nose on those Banshees up and we didn’t stop until we hit 55,000 ft. None of those other birds could get up there. We flew back in bright daylight to our carrier, with everybody in the world trying to get to us. They’d get up to maybe 38,000-40,000 ft before spinning out. They couldn’t even get within weapons range of us. We just sat there and watched the show as we went home. We topped off again [from] the tankers out over the ocean on the way back.

‘Gayler, Ames and I still hold the record for the longest non-stop Banshee flight off of and back onto a carrier. We were airborne close to eight hours.’

VC-3 and VC-4, already busy with deployments of nightfighters such as the F4U-5N (and F2H-2N in the case of VC-4), took on the nuclear weapons role with the F2H-2B. The Atlantic Fleet's night-attack squadron, VC-33, had added two AD-4Bs to its AD-4N detachments deploying to the Mediterranean, but these only had nuclear capability in a day attack scenario. The AJ remained the sole carrier-based aircraft with all-weather nuclear attack capability until mid-1952, when VC-3 and VC-4 began receiving F2H-2Bs.

During October 1952, VC-3 deployed a detachment of four F2H-2Bs to NAS Atsugi to be on hand in the event of a nuclear contingency. Charles H Brown, in his book *Dark Sky, Black Sea – Aircraft Carrier Night and All-Weather Operations* detailing his experiences with VC-3, described the concept of operations for the VC-3 detachment and the AD-4B detachment of the Pacific Fleet's night-attack squadron, VC-35, as follows;

'The theory was that the VC detachment pilots and aircrews could be switched between the shore-based nuclear weapons team and the nightfighter and attack teams assigned to the carriers fighting the Korean War. In so doing, the carrier night operations as well as nuclear weapons delivery proficiency of all the VC squadron's pilots could be maintained. The pilot switch would occur when the combat crews needed rest. In hindsight, as might be expected, the stress of battle tended to make the men sent to Atsugi neglect their nuclear weapons training. After the Korean War ended in 1953, the VC-35 and VC-3 nuclear weapons detachments at NAS Atsugi were disbanded.'



This F2H-2P (possibly BuNo 125683) was assigned to HEDRON-2, based at MCAS Cherry Point. The unit deployed a one-of-a-kind detachment of F2H-2Ps and F2H-2Bs to the Mediterranean with CVG-8 on board *Coral Sea* in 1953 (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

When *Lake Champlain* deployed to the Korean War in early 1953, the embarked carrier air group, CVG-4, included VC-4 Detachment 44 with four F3D-2s and four F2H-2Bs. Upon arrival in-theatre, the detachment was split-sited ashore, with Detachment 44's F3D-2s operating from Kunsan (K-8) airfield with VMF(N)-513 and the F2H-2Bs flying from Atsugi as a nuclear alert force, known as Detachment 44N. The officer in charge of Detachment 44, Lt Jerry O'Rourke, flew with the F3Ds. When *Lake Champlain* headed home, the F2H-2Bs were re-embarked on the carrier, while the F3Ds were left behind with VMF(N)-513 and their crews flown home in transports.

As far as records show, VC-3 made no carrier deployments with the F2H-2B. According to Feightner, the nuclear capability was restricted to the East Coast in direct support of NATO. 'The West Coast didn't really have targets assigned at that point', he said.

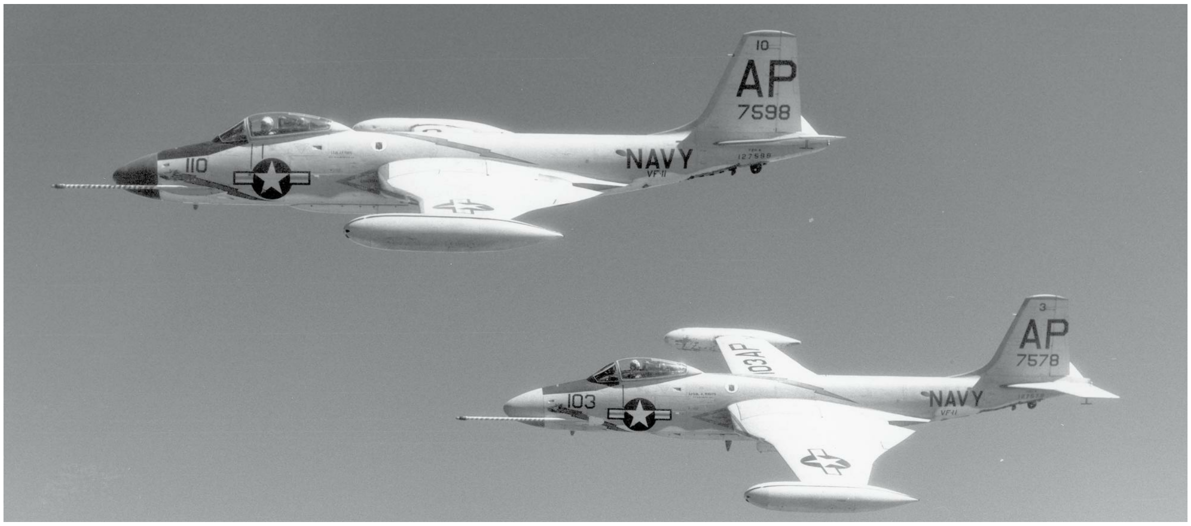
VC-4 made only three deployments with the F2H-2B (see **Appendices**). US Marine Corps unit Headquarters Squadron (HEDRON) 2 was called upon to supply a detachment of F2H-2Bs and F2H-2Ps in 1953 for CVG-8 embarked in *Coral Sea*. However, three fighter squadrons included F2H-2Bs mixed in with their F2H-2 day fighters (see **Appendices**). VF-82 deployed to the Mediterranean with F2H-2/2B/2Ns as part of CVG-8 on board *Lake Champlain* during 1954–55, while VF-101, which deployed with CVG-1 on board *Midway* on a round-the-world cruise that same year, was equipped with both F2H-2s and F2H-2Bs. VF-74 also included F2H-2Bs in its inventory at some point, but it is not known if it deployed with them.

‘That [small] Banshee was a long-legged bird’, Feightner noted, ‘but it didn’t have a good radar in it. It really wasn’t the answer and, of course, we went to the Banshee 3 and 4 after that, both of which were perfectly capable. The Banshee 2 was, in essence, honest to God, the first US Navy jet with an atomic bomb capability.’

CHAPTER FIVE

THE 'BIG BANJO'

As successful as the F2H-2 was as a carrier-based jet fighter in the Korean War, it was soon to be succeeded by two new Banshee variants that would retain the attributes of the F2H-2 but add both an all-weather intercept (formerly termed 'nightfighter') capability and a nuclear strike capability, all in one aircraft. The F2H-3 and similar F2H-4 would replace not only the F2H-2, but also the F2H-2N and F2H-2B in fleet squadrons.

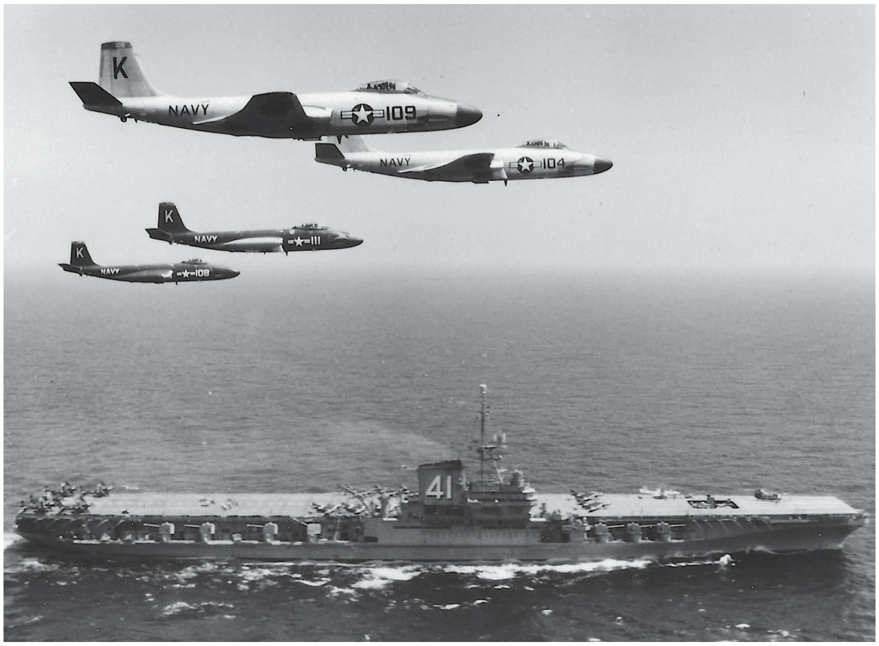


VF-11 F2H-4s BuNos 127578 and 127598 fly form on 25 May 1958. The 'Red Rippers' were assigned to ATG-201 for a world cruise on board *Essex* when this photograph was taken, flying cover for the US intervention in the Lebanese Civil War (*Christopher P Cavas Collection*)

The F2H-3, which came to be called the 'Big Banshee' or 'Big Banjo', was a major re-design of the F2H-2 – comparable in scale to the 1990s re-design of the F/A-18C/D Hornet into the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet. The F2H-3 incorporated lessons from the combat experience of the Korean War.

The new aircraft featured an eight-foot extension in the fuselage that moved the cockpit well forward of the wing's leading edge, and, to compensate, the horizontal stabiliser was moved down and farther aft on the tail and given a ten-degree dihedral. Following flutter problems with the F2H-3, structural strengthening of the empennage was accomplished and a fillet called a 'horsal' was added to the forward leading edge of the horizontal stabiliser. These modifications were retrofitted to existing early production aircraft.

The F2H-3 was powered by two Westinghouse J34-WE-34 turbojets each delivering 3250 lbs of thrust. The aircraft featured a 50 per cent increase in fuel capacity over the F2H-2, although its tip tanks were reduced in capacity from 200 gallons to 170 gallons. They were often not carried during flight operations. Some F2H-3s were fitted with an aerial refuelling system that included a probe that took the place of the port upper cannon – another change from the port-side probe of the F2H-2B. The plumbing from the probe extended under the fuselage in a fairing to the fuselage fuel tank. F2H-3s so fitted had a slightly bulged ventral appearance. The system was removable so as to enable the refitting of the upper port cannon.



Four F2H-3s from VF-31 fly over *Midway* in February 1954. VF-31 was assigned to CVG-6 (tail code 'C') at the time, but of the four core squadrons within the carrier air group, only VA-25 marked its aircraft with the letter 'C'. VF-31 kept the tail code 'K', signifying its previous assignment to CVG-3. Note the natural aluminium finish of the jets closest to the camera. As many as three different colour schemes could be found adorning all manner of US Navy and US Marine Corps aircraft during this period of transition from overall Glossy Sea Blue to grey and white (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

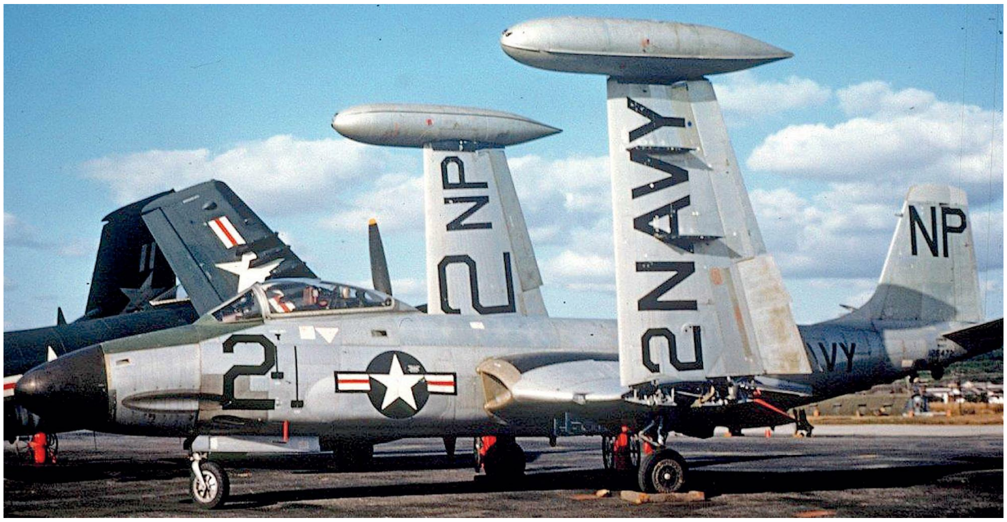
The fuselage extension provided space in the nose for the Westinghouse APQ-41 intercept radar. M12 or M16 20 mm cannon replaced the M3 guns and featured a greater ammunition capability. The gun ports were moved farther aft in the nose to accommodate the larger radar antenna. Each wing featured four racks for 500-lb (or smaller) bombs or rockets. A Mk 7 or Mk 8 nuclear weapon could be carried under the starboard wing in a change from the F2H-2B's port wing carriage. The main landing gear was strengthened to handle the increased payload capacity. The F2H-3 ended up more than a ton heavier than the F2H-2.

To develop the F2H-3, F2H-2N BuNo 123311 was modified to be the aerodynamic prototype. The first production F2H-3 took to the skies on 29 March 1952. The 'Big Banjo' demonstrated a maximum range increased by approximately 250 nautical miles and a service ceiling elevated by 1800 ft.

McDonnell began serial production of the F2H-3 in early 1952, delivering a total run of 250 aircraft by 30 October 1953 – a proposed F2H-3P photo-reconnaissance version was cancelled. The BuNo blocks of the F2H-3 production were 126291-126350, 126354-126489 and 127493-127546. Two F2H-3s assigned to the Naval Air Missile Test Center eventually acquired the designation F2H-2M.

The F2H-3 was deployed to the Western Pacific in 1953, but it arrived in-theatre too late to participate in the Korean War. The F2H-3 was not operated by US Marine Corps fighter squadrons.

The final 'Big Banshee' version, the F2H-4, was similar to the F2H-3 but featured the Hughes E-10 fire-control system with the APG-37 intercept radar, which was the US Navy's first operational radar with a space-stabilised antenna – the APG-37 was reportedly retrofitted into many F2H-3s. The F2H-4 also featured the same engines as the F2H-3, as well as the latter's nuclear weapons pylon and delivery capability. One F2H-3 was modified into the F2H-4 prototype, and McDonnell built 150 examples, completing production of the F2H-4 in September 1953, just before the last F2H-3s rolled off the line. The F2H-4 BuNo blocks were 126351-126353 and 127547-127693.



Early F2H-3 BuNo 126472, assigned to VC-3, is seen at Itazuke air base in 1953. The F2H-3 was in the process of augmenting and replacing the squadron's F2H-2Bs on a deployment to Japan to maintain a nuclear-capable presence in the Far East. The early horizontal stabiliser can be seen, as well as the natural aluminium finish of the aircraft. This aircraft subsequently served with VF-64 during its two-year association with the Banshee (*Patrick Martin*)

The F2H-4 received the dual nightfighter and nuclear delivery mission in 1954, eventually taking over the role from the F2H-2N and F2H-2B, respectively. In addition to extensive US Navy use, the F2H-4 was also operated by three US Marine Corps squadrons.

The initial F2H-3s and F2H-4s were delivered in the same gloss sea blue as the F2H-2s, but most aircraft subsequently emerged from the factory in a natural aluminium finish in an ill-fated attempt to reduce both corrosion and visibility to an enemy. The Non-Specular Light Gull Gray over Gloss Insignia White scheme introduced from February 1955 eventually prevailed over the earlier schemes.

Starting in 1958, the AAM-7A (later re-designated AIM-9B) Sidewinder air-to-air missile could be carried under each wing of the F2H-3/4, giving it more capability in an air-to-air role.

Rear Adm James D 'Jig Dog' Ramage, who commanded Bombing Squadron (VB) 10's SBD Dauntless dive-bombers during the Battle of the Philippine Sea, was CAG of CVG-19 in 1952–54 and flew F2H-3s of VF-193 and VC-3 Det E. He subsequently served as CO of Banshee-equipped VC-3 in 1954–55. 'It was just a very comfortable airplane to handle, very easy to take aboard [a carrier]', Ramage explained. 'It had no bad habits at all. It was slightly underpowered, of course, compared to the planes we have today'.

F2H-3s were first delivered to VC-3 and VC-4 to complement and then replace F2H-2Bs and F2H-2Ns. They would also replace the F3D Skyknights in both squadrons. VC-4 Det 44's Lt Jerry O'Rourke offered his opinion of the new 'Big Banjo' shortly after it entered service;

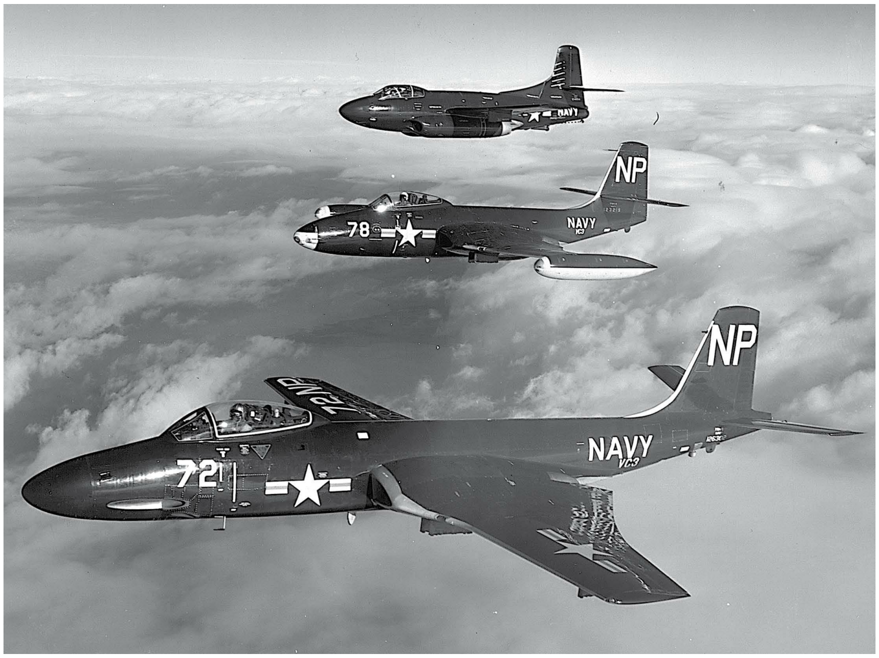
'The F2H-3 and -4 promise added speed and rate of climb, and with competent night pilots can attain equal or better results than the F3D. Their serious drawbacks are their lack of a tail warning radar and their extreme tailpipe glow. Their use on missions similar to the above would be limited. However, as a night interceptor for fleet use, they are definitely superior in every respect to the F3D.'

VC-3 began receiving F2H-3s during the Korean War to supplement its F3D-2s. In August 1954 it also took on the training role for other jets entering service, becoming an early manifestation of a fleet replacement squadron for the F2H, FJ-3, F7U and F9F-6 at Moffett Field. By 1955, the F2H-2B's nuclear prowess had been superseded by the F2H-3 and F2H-4, with its new radar and nuclear capability enabling it to combine nightfighting – by now called all-weather capability – and nuclear weapons capability in a single fighter. As 'Big Banjos' equipped VC-3 and VC-4, the F2H-2Bs were replaced on board carriers in the nuclear weapon delivery role.

A detachment from VC-4 took the 'Big Banjo' on its first deployment, to the Mediterranean, with CVG-1 on board *Franklin D Roosevelt* in June 1953. Soon after, on 1 July 1953, VC-3 Detachment C deployed with CVG-11 for Korea with the F2H-3 on board *Kearsarge*, but with the armistice coming into effect on 27 July, the detachment arrived too late to enter the war. VC-3 ultimately sent 'Big Banjo' detachments on 11 attack carrier deployments between July 1953 and June 1956 (see **Appendices**). Equipped with F2H-3s, all of them operated in the Western Pacific and two were round-the-world cruises.

VC-4 despatched F2H-3 detachments on four attack carrier deployments between June 1953 and February 1954 (see **Appendices**), thrice to the Mediterranean and on one round-the-world cruise. In September 1954, VC-4 began the first of five F2H-4 detachments on attack carriers, thrice to the Mediterranean and two round-the-world cruises. VC-4 was re-designated All-Weather Fighter Squadron (VF(AW)) 4 on 2 July 1956, and as such the unit returned home from its last 'Big Banjo' deployment to WestPac on an attack carrier in April 1957.

As the fleet fighter squadrons were equipped with 'Big Banjos', the nuclear delivery role of the VC detachments had faded away by 1957. The previous year, VC-3 began receiving F4D-1 Skyrays to replace its Banshees, and on 1 July 1956 it was re-designated VF(AW)-3. The unit was disestablished in April 1963.



A family portrait of VC-3's jets on 15 December 1952. The early F2H-3 (BuNo 126302), foreground, was in the process of replacing the F2H-2Bs and the F3D-2. The middle aircraft is standard F2H-2 BuNo 123219, which was used by the squadron for pilot training. VC-3 undertook eight F2H-3 deployments to the Western Pacific, two world cruises and a single Mediterranean deployment on board Essex-class carriers between July 1953 and June 1956 (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

The first fleet fighter squadron to be equipped with the F2H-4 was VF-11, and Lt Cdr 'Whitey' Feightner assumed command of the unit in January 1955. It had completed the first deployment with the jet the previous month, having sailed to the Mediterranean on board *Coral Sea* as part of CVG-10. 'We were one of the first squadrons to have the Mk 7 [nuclear] capability' he recalled. 'It was a tremendous thing in those days'.

According to Feightner, VF-11 was the only squadron to score 100 per cent on a Mk 7 nuclear weapons delivery exercise. He also recalled a surprise nuclear weapons inspection. 'We all had to launch. At 0800 hrs we got 12 hours' notice [of the impending inspection, which culminated in a squadron-strength bombing mission]. We all went out [to the Pinecastle range in central

Florida] and each one of us got four runs at the target. Every pilot in the squadron got an E (for excellence) that morning'.

NAVY
VF-11
"THE RED RIPPERS"
100%
E
WINNERS
•WORLD•FAMOUS•
THE RED RIPPERS

Naval Aviators from VF-11 'Red Rippers' have arranged their helmets to celebrate the squadron's receipt of the Battle 'E' – the Battle Efficiency Award, presented annually to units and naval vessels that demonstrate the highest state of battle readiness – at NAS Cecil Field in 1956. The commanding officer, World War 2 ace and former test pilot Cdr Edward L 'Whitey' Feightner (kneeling, far left), was key to developing effective fighter tactics for the Banshee (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

Feightner's VF-11 deployed to the Mediterranean Sea from August 1956 to February 1957 again with CVG-10 on board *Coral Sea*. The Suez Crisis of October–November 1956 had the ship and carrier air group on edge in the Mediterranean, with the US Navy making an emergency deployment of more carriers to the eastern Atlantic near the Azores as backup.

'I had a lot of experienced pilots that went with me to the squadron and they did everything because we really needed to have a [nuclear] capability over in the Mediterranean', Feightner explained. 'Our big mission in those days was to kill all of the fighter airfields so the [USAF] bombers could get through. We were supposed to precede them and wipe out all the fighter fields en route to the bombers' target so that they would get through to drop their ordnance. We all had targets assigned to us, of course, while we were over there. We certainly executed that capability to get to any one of them. I was the only pilot in the squadron that knew everybody's target. Nobody else knew who was going where, so if they got captured, they couldn't divulge anything. I was going to have to shoot myself if the enemy caught me'.

Feightner revealed in the 2009 interview that during low-visibility days, he actually overflew the Soviet Union to show that it could be done in an F2H-4. His overflights apparently went undetected, generating no response from Soviet air defences. 'Several times I went to my target over there in Russia whenever the weather was down. I would just get up in that big Banshee and we had plenty of fuel, so I'd just cruise over and get a radar picture of what my flight plan looked like. I was just trying to prove that we could actually get to these targets. I never once got intercepted by anybody.

'We stayed in the clouds most of the time, but they didn't have the capability to come up there and get us. Several times, I'd see them [Soviet fighters] on radar. They must've tracked me over there, I'm sure, but nobody ever did attempt to intercept me. Back in the early days everybody was sceptical about whether we could safely perform such overflights. They asked me if I wanted to attempt one, and I actually went to my assigned targets in Russia on three separate occasions and came back without anybody laying a glove on me. In fact, I never experienced any problems at all.'

US NAVY BANSHEE VF SQUADRONS

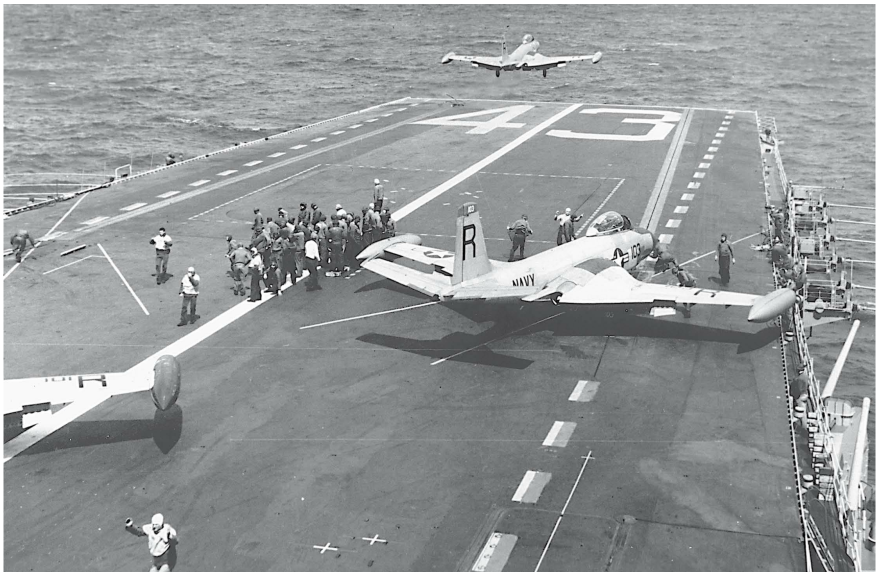
Below are short histories of each of the US Navy's 26 deploying F2H Banshee VF squadrons, listed in order of their first deployment with the aircraft. Detailed deployment data can be found in the Appendices.

VF-171 – as previously mentioned, VF-171 was the fleet's first F2H-2 fighter squadron. It made the Banshee's first deployment, to the Mediterranean in September 1950 with CVG-17 on board *Coral Sea*. It completed two more deployments equipped with the F2H-2 on board *Franklin D Roosevelt* to the Mediterranean. As it was with the FH-1, F2H-1 and F2H-2, VF-171 had the privilege of being the first fighter squadron to operate the F2H-3, upgrading to that version during the first half of 1953. VF-171 became the first F2H-3 fighter squadron to deploy, embarking in USS *Wasp* (CVA-18) with CVG-17 in September 1953 on a round-the-world cruise. A deployment on board *Coral Sea* to the Mediterranean followed in 1955. VF-171 made an emergency deployment to the eastern Atlantic in November 1956 with CVG-1 on board the brand new USS *Forrestal* (CVA-

59) in response to the Suez Crisis, being equipped with a mix of F2H-3/4s. The unit's final deployment to the Mediterranean – with CVG-17 on board *Franklin D Roosevelt* – also included a mix of F2H-3/4s and concluded on 5 March 1958. The squadron was disestablished just ten days later.

VF-172 – this unit was close behind VF-171 in the transition to the F2H-2, and the pair deployed with CVG-17 embarked in *Coral Sea* to the Mediterranean in September 1950. The 'Blue Bolts' left CVG-17 to make the Banshee's first deployment to the Korean War, in June 1951, with CVG-5 on board *Essex*. Returning to CVG-17 upon its return, VF-172 undertook three more deployments in F2H-2s with VF-171 as part of the carrier air group – one on board *Franklin D Roosevelt* to the Mediterranean in 1952, followed by a round-the-world cruise embarked in *Wasp* in 1953–54 and, finally, a return to the Mediterranean with *Coral Sea* in 1955. VF-172 was re-designated VA-172 on 1 November 1955, although it retained its F2H-2s. The unit made a brief deployment to the eastern Atlantic in May–June 1957 with CVG-7 on board USS *Saratoga* (CVA-60) as part of the new carrier's post-commissioning work-up. This would prove to be the 'Blue Bolts'' last Banshee deployment as a full squadron. From 19 August to 22 October of that same year, VA-172 provided fighter protection in the form of Detachment 38 for the anti-submarine carrier USS *Tarawa* (CVS-40) during the vessel's two-month-long northern Atlantic deployment. VA-172 never transitioned to the 'Big Banjo', instead becoming one of the first squadrons to fly the new A4D-1 Skyhawk attack aircraft from December 1957.

VF-11 – the 'Red Rippers' initially made the transition from the F8F Bearcat to the F2H-1 but received F2H-2s in short order. The squadron made one deployment with CVG-1 to the Mediterranean on board *Coral Sea* in 1951 before its 1952–53 Korean War deployment with CVG-101 (re-designated CVG-14 during the deployment) embarked in *Kearsarge*. Upon returning home to NAS Jacksonville, VF-11 gave up its F2H-2s for F3D-2 Skyknights, but these had in turn been replaced by new F2H-4s by early 1954. The squadron took the 'Big Banjos' on a deployment to the Mediterranean with CVG-10 on board *Coral Sea* during the second half of 1954. In another switch, VF-11 gave up its F2H-4s for old F2H-2s in late 1955, before receiving F2H-4s again in 1956. The 'Red Rippers' would take their 'Big Banjos' on two more deployments, one with CVG-10 on board *Coral Sea* to the Mediterranean in 1956–57 and, finally, a nine-month-long world cruise with ATG-201 on board *Essex* in 1958. VF-11 was disestablished on 15 February 1959 – this VF-11 should not be confused with a subsequent, later, VF-11, which was re-designated from VF-43 on 16 February 1959.



F2H-3s from VF-171 undertake flight operations with CVG-17 from *Coral Sea* in the mid-Atlantic on 20 April 1955 – just two weeks into a Mediterranean deployment. VF-171 was the first fleet squadron to fly the FH-1, F2H-1, F2H-2 and F2H-3, and it also operated Banshees longer than any other frontline unit (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

VF-12 – known as the 'Flying Ubangis', this unit received F2H-1s to replace its F8Fs, but upgraded to the F2H-2 in December 1950. The squadron was paired with VF-11 in CVG-1 for the 'Flying Ubangis'' first Banshee deployment, embarked in *Coral Sea*, to the Mediterranean in 1951. The squadron remained with CVG-1 for three more deployments with F2H-2s, with two of them being to the Mediterranean in *Wasp* (1952) and *Franklin D Roosevelt* (1953). VF-12's final Banshee deployment was a world cruise with CVG-1 embarked in *Midway* from December 1954 through to July 1955. It was on this deployment that VF-12 (along with fellow F2H-2-equipped squadron VF-101) provided fighter cover for the Nationalist Chinese evacuation of the Dachen Islands, which were under attack by communist Chinese forces. The F2H-2 was the last type of Banshee operated by the 'Flying Ubangis', as the squadron was re-designated VA-12 on 1 August 1955 prior to transitioning to the F7U-3 Cutlass.

VF-62 – an F8F squadron that transitioned to the F2H-2 in August 1950, the ‘Gladiators’ deployed in May 1951 to the Mediterranean with CVG-4 on board *Oriskany*. The carrier air group also included Banshee-equipped VMF-122. The ‘Gladiators’ made two more deployments with CVG-4, the first one being to the Mediterranean on board *Coral Sea* in 1952 and then to the Korean War on board *Lake Champlain* in 1953 – F2H-2-equipped VF-22 was also part of the carrier air group on the latter deployment. After a 1954 cruise to the Mediterranean with CVG-10 on board *Coral Sea*, VF-62 was re-designated VA-106 on 1 July 1955 and converted to the F9F-8B Cougar.

VF-34 – the ‘Blue Blasters’ were the first squadron to make the transition to the Banshee from the F9F Panther, the unit being equipped with F2H-2s by February 1952. The squadron made two deployments to the Mediterranean, the first in 1952–53 with CVG-3 on board USS *Leyte* (CV-32) and the second in 1954–55 with ATG-181 on board USS *Randolph* (CVA-15). Six months prior to the commencement of the second deployment, a carrier qualification period for ATG-181 on board USS *Bennington* (CVA-20) had been cut short by an explosion and fire on 26 May 1954 while the vessel was sailing off Rhode Island. There were 103 fatalities (including seven VF-34 personnel) among the air task group and crew. VF-34 was re-designated VA-34 on 1 July 1955, and within four months it had traded its F2H-2s for F7U-3 Cutlasses. The latter were in turn replaced by A4D-1 Skyhawks in early 1956.

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An F2H-3 of VF-71 F2H-3 traps on board *Bennington* in late 1953 during CVG-7's first deployment – to the Mediterranean – with the Banshee. The significance of the number '79' crudely painted on the jet's radome is unknown. This early F2H-3 boasts a natural aluminium finish, which did little to protect the airframe from corrosion in an ocean environment (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

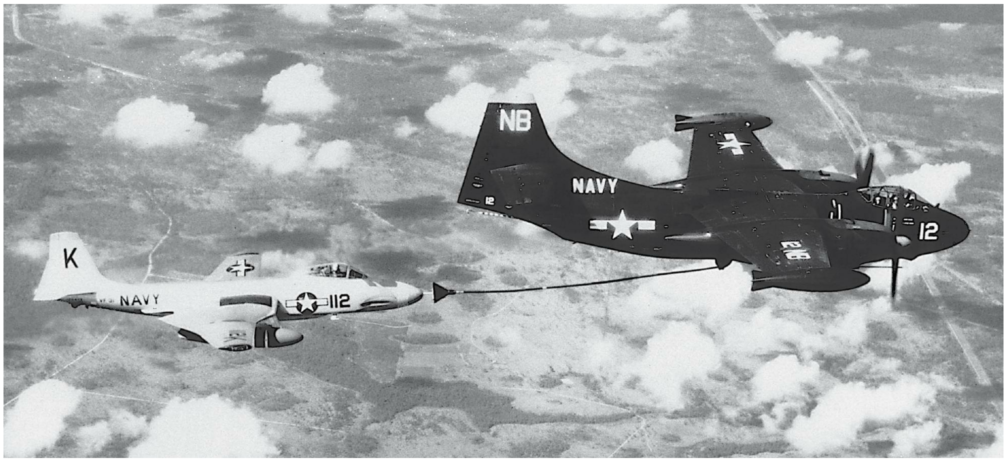
VF-22 – the 'Cavaliers' upgraded from F4U Corsairs to F2H-2 Banshees in 1952, and it took them on their first jet deployment with CVG-4 on board *Lake Champlain* in April 1953. For this cruise, the 'Cavaliers' were paired with VF-62 for the only dual-Banshee fighter squadron deployment to the Korean War. VF-22 remained with CVG-4, being paired with Banshee-equipped VF-44 and embarking in USS *Intrepid* (CVA-11) to the Mediterranean in 1955 in what turned out to be the last carrier deployment of fighter squadrons equipped with the F2H-2. VF-22 had transitioned to the F2H-4 by June 1956, and later that same year the squadron embarked twice in *Saratoga*, first for a shakedown cruise and then a quick turn-around for a short deployment to the eastern Atlantic in response to the Suez Crisis. The 'Cavaliers' made a final deployment, to the Mediterranean, in 1957–58 on board *Randolph*, the squadron operating a mixed force of F2H-3s and F2H-4s through to its disestablishment on 6 June 1958.

VF-101 – established on 1 May 1952, this unit adopted the 'Grim Reapers' traditions of the famous World War 2 fighter squadron VF-10. Initially equipped with FG-1D Corsairs and F2H-1 Banshees, the squadron had upgraded to the F2H-2 prior to its only deployment with the Banshee. Assigned to CVG-1, it embarked in *Midway* in December 1954 for a world cruise that lasted until July 1955. VF-101, which was also equipped with a handful of F2H-2Bs, was paired with F2H-2-equipped VF-12. The *Midway* deployment was also noteworthy for the fact that VC-4 had a detachment of F2H-4s embarked in the carrier. VF-101 upgraded to the F4D-1 Skyray in August 1956.

VF-71 – this unit had flown F8F-1s and F6F-5Ps prior to switching to F9F-2 Panthers in 1950. Following a Mediterranean deployment with CVG-7 on board *Midway* in 1950 and a Korean War cruise with the same carrier air group on board *Bon Homme Richard* in 1952–53, VF-71 completed its sea service with the Panther in May 1953, following a three-month shakedown cruise embarked in *Bennington*. Converting to the F3H-3/4 in 1954, the squadron stayed with CVG-7 for a WestPac deployment on board *Hornet* in 1955, during which it covered Operation *Passage to Freedom* – the US-supported evacuation of 310,000 Vietnamese civilians, soldiers and non-Vietnamese members of the French Army from the communist north of the newly partitioned country. After a brief deployment into the North Atlantic in late 1957 with CVG-6 on board *Intrepid* for NATO's Exercise Strikeback, F2H-4-equipped VF-71, back with CVG-7, made its last cruise, to the Mediterranean, in 1958–59 on board *Randolph*. VF-71 was disestablished on 31 March 1959.

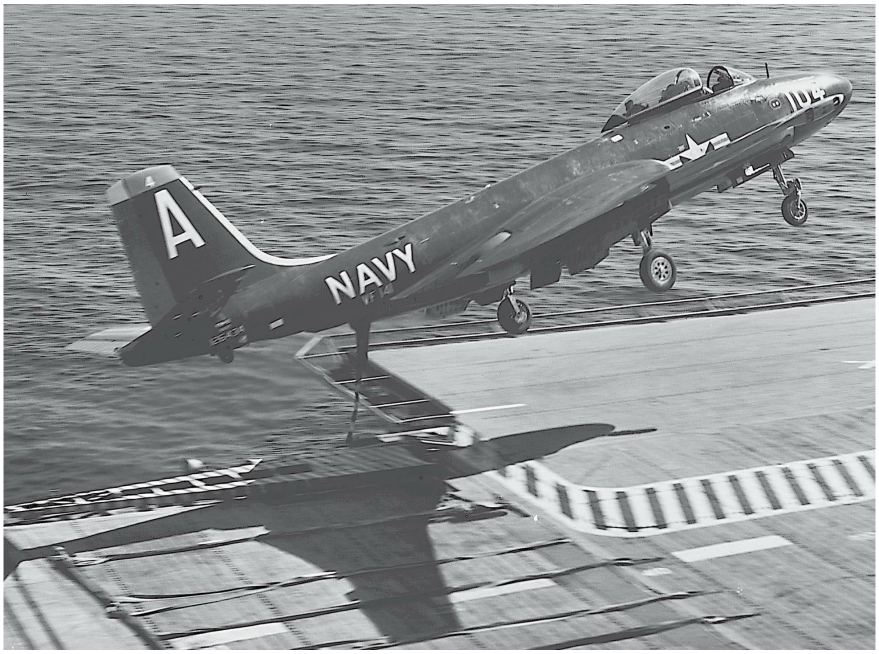
VF-23 – having completed three deployments to the Korean War (one with F4U-4s and two with F9F-2s) prior to switching to F2H-3s in 1953, the 'Flashers' subsequently undertook only two cruises with Banshees. The first of these was a WestPac with ATG-2 embarked in *Essex*, the carrier deploying in December 1953. Three months into the cruise, VF-23 patrolled off Vietnam during the Viet Minh siege of Dien Bien Phu. VF-23 commenced its second Banshee deployment in March 1956 with ATG-4 on board USS *Yorktown* (CVA-10), the unit returning from WestPac six months later. In December of that same year the 'Flashers' began upgrading to the F4D-1 Skyray. Two years later, as an F3H-2 Demon squadron, VF-23 was re-designated VF-151 on 23 February 1959.

VF-31 – a Panther squadron from 1949, the 'Tomcatters', had completed two Mediterranean cruises and a Korean War deployment with CVG-3 on board *Leyte* in 1950–51 prior to transitioning to the F2H-2 in 1952. The unit undertook another Mediterranean cruise with the same carrier/carrier air group combination from August 1952 through to February 1953, after which it switched to the F2H-3s. The 'Tomcatters' completed two more Mediterranean cruises with the Banshee, embarking in *Midway* with CVG-6 in 1954 and then returning to CVG-3 for its 1955–56 deployment on board *Ticonderoga* – it had re-equipped with F2H-4s by then. VF-31 commenced its transition to the F3H-2N Demon in November 1956.



A VF-31 F2H-3 refuels from an AJ-2 Savage assigned to VC-5 during pre-deployment work-ups on 12 October 1955. The Banshee carries a Mk 7 nuclear shape on its starboard pylon, such a store accurately simulating the dimensions and weight of the bomb but without the warhead and associated fuses. Prior to Banshee-equipped fleet fighter squadrons being tasked with carrying nuclear weapons, VC-3 and VC-4 had given aircraft carriers their first practical nuclear strike capability. Even with the Banshee's excellent range, aerial refuelling was likely necessary for the jets to reach their targets in the Soviet Union and then return back to their carriers (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

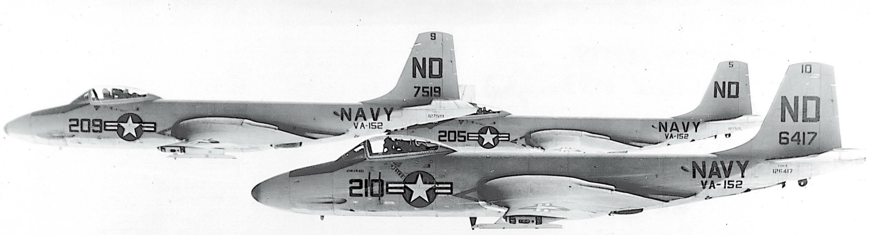
VF-141 – this unit, as VF-721, was originally mobilised in July 1950 for active duty in the Korean War. It saw action with CVG-101 on two combat deployments with F9F-2s, flying from *Boxer* in 1951 and *Kearsarge* in 1952–53. On 4 February 1953, in the final weeks of the latter cruise, VF-721 was re-designated VF-141 when CVG-101 was re-designated CVG-14. Upon returning from the war, the 'Iron Angels' received F2H-3s in March 1953. With Banshees, VF-141 made two deployments – in 1954 to the Mediterranean with CVG-14 on board *Randolph*, and then a WestPac with CVG-5 on board *Kearsarge* in 1955–56. In June 1956, VF-141 made the transition to the F4D-1 Skyray.



The pilot of VF-141 F2H-3 BuNo 126434 executes a late bolter on 21 July 1954 during flight operations from *Randolph*, the 'Iron Angels' being deployed to the Mediterranean as a unit of CVG-14 at the time. VF-141 (formerly reserve-manned VF-721) upgraded to the F2H-3 from the F9F-2 after the last of its two deployments to the Korean War. The Banshee was well-liked by pilots, who considered it 'good around the boat'. BuNo 126443 was sold to the RCN in July 1956, and later performed the final ever flight made by a Banshee on 10 January 1963. The aircraft is currently on display in the Naval Museum of Alberta in Calgary (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

VF-152 – the 'Fighting Aces' began as reserve squadron VF-713, which was mobilised for active duty in February 1951 and equipped with F4U-4s – it subsequently undertook two WestPac/Korean War cruises with CVG-15 on board *Antietam* (1951–52) and *Princeton* (1953). VF-713 was re-designated VF-152 on 4 February 1953, and in November of that year it began a transition to F2H-3s. The 'Fighting Aces' participated in two more WestPac cruises with CVG-15, the first one in 1954–55 on board *Yorktown* and the second embarked in *Wasp* in 1956. In 1958, VF-152 deployed with ATG-4 on board *Hornet*, and the carrier operated in the South China Sea in response to the communist insurrection in Indonesia. After returning home, VF-152 was re-designated VA-152 on 1 August 1958, and it made one more WestPac deployment with Banshees as part of ATG-4 on board *Bennington* in 1958–59. During September–October 1958, CVG-4 operated off Taiwan in response to communist Chinese provocations against the Republic of China. VA-152 returned home in January 1959 and, in an unusual event, transitioned from jets back to propeller-driven aircraft in the form of AD-6 Skyraiders from February 1959.

VF-82 – this unit was originally F4U-4-equipped, reserve-manned VF-742, which was mobilised for active duty in February 1951 and sent on a Mediterranean cruise with CVG-8 on board *Tarawa* nine months later. It switched to F9F-5s in September 1952, and on 4 February 1953 VF-742 was re-designated VF-82. However, before the unit could deploy, the 'Iron Men' switched to the F2H-2. VF-82 subsequently made two deployments with CVG-8 to the Mediterranean with Banshees. The first, in 1954–55 on board *Lake Champlain*, saw the squadron flying F2H-2Bs and F2H-2Ns alongside its F2H-2s. The reason for the mix remains obscure. The deployment also included F2H-4s from VC-4 Detachment 4. For the second cruise – on board *Intrepid* – VF-82 upgraded to the F2H-4. Upon returning from its final Banshee deployment in September 1956, the 'Iron Men' upgraded to the F3H-2 Demon. VF-82 was disestablished on 15 April 1959.

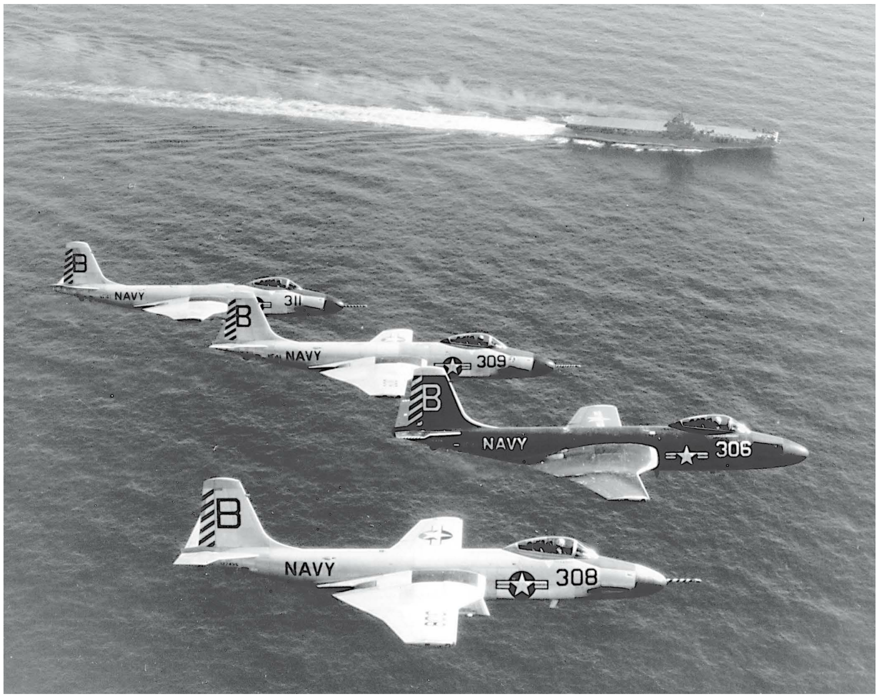


Three F2H-3s (BuNos 127519 leading, 126417 to port and 127515 to starboard) from VF-152, assigned to ATG-4, fly in close formation whilst undertaking a training mission from *Hornet* during the carrier's 1958 WestPac deployment. Note the empty Sidewinder launch rails on at least two of the aircraft (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

VF-41 – the 'Black Aces' were established on 1 September 1950 with F4U-4s, just two months after an earlier VF-41, also equipped with Corsairs, was disestablished. This new unit owed its existence to the outbreak of war in Korea on 25 June. VF-41 deployed twice to the Mediterranean in 1952–53 with its F4U-4s as part of CVG-6, the squadron being embarked in *Midway* for both cruises. It commenced transitioning to the F2H-3 in July 1953 and, following two brief Caribbean cruises embarked in *Hornet* in 1953–54, returned to the Mediterranean in 1954–55 with ATG-181 on board *Randolph*. In January 1956 VF-41 deployed on board *Forrestal* for its shakedown cruise. The unit's last Banshee deployment took place in 1956–57 with ATG-

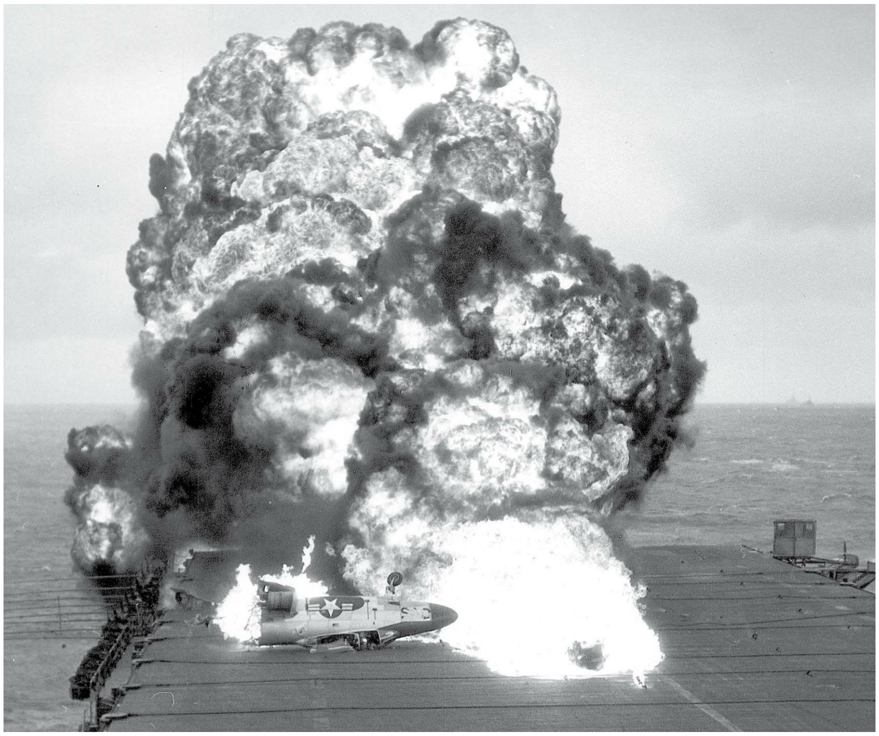
181 on board *Bennington*, this time to the Western Pacific. In 1958 VF-41 upgraded to the F2H-2 Demon.

VF-193 – originally equipped with F8F Bearcats, VF-193 had a long relationship with CVG-19. Having completed one WestPac with the Bearcat on board *Boxer* during the first six months of 1950, the 'Ghost Riders' switched to the F4U-4 later that same year and subsequently undertook two deployments to the Korean War with CVG-19 embarked in *Princeton* in 1950–51 and 1952. Briefly transitioning to the F9F-2 Panther, VF-193 switched to the F2H-3 in late 1952. The 'Ghost Riders' would make three deployments to the Western Pacific with CVG-19, on board *Oriskany* in 1953–54 and again in 1955, and on board *Yorktown* in 1957. After returning home, VF-193 upgraded to the F3H-2 Demon in November 1957.



Four F2H-3s from VF-41 fly past *Randolph* in early 1955 during ATG-181's deployment to the Mediterranean. Three of the jets have been fitted with refuelling probes in place of their lower port-side 20 mm cannon, and the one in the foreground carries a storeless nuclear weapon pylon. The three unpainted aircraft have visible staining around their starboard gun ports, indicating that their weapons have been recently fired (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

VF-44 – established in September 1950 with F4U-4s, this unit undertook its first cruise, to the Mediterranean, as part of CVG-1 embarked in *Coral Sea* during 1951. The 'Hornets' had switched to CVG-4 by the time the squadron returned to the Mediterranean, again on board *Coral Sea*, in 1952. Still flying F4U-4s, VF-44 undertook operations in the Mediterranean, Indian Ocean and over Korea during its 1953 cruise with CVG-4 embarked in *Lake Champlain* – it also crossdecked to *Boxer* at the end of June and flew with ATG-1 (which, in turn, sent F9F-5-equipped VF-111 to *Lake Champlain*) in the final weeks of the Korean War. Upon returning home in December 1953, the 'Hornets' began to transition to the F2H-2. VF-44 only made one deployment with the Banshee, paired with F2H-2-equipped VF-22 in CVG-4 on board *Intrepid* during the carrier's 1955 cruise. This deployment, to the Mediterranean, was the last for fighter squadrons equipped with the F2H-2. VF-44 was re-designated VA-44 on 1 January 1956 and issued with F9F-8 Cougars in place of its obsolescent Banshees.

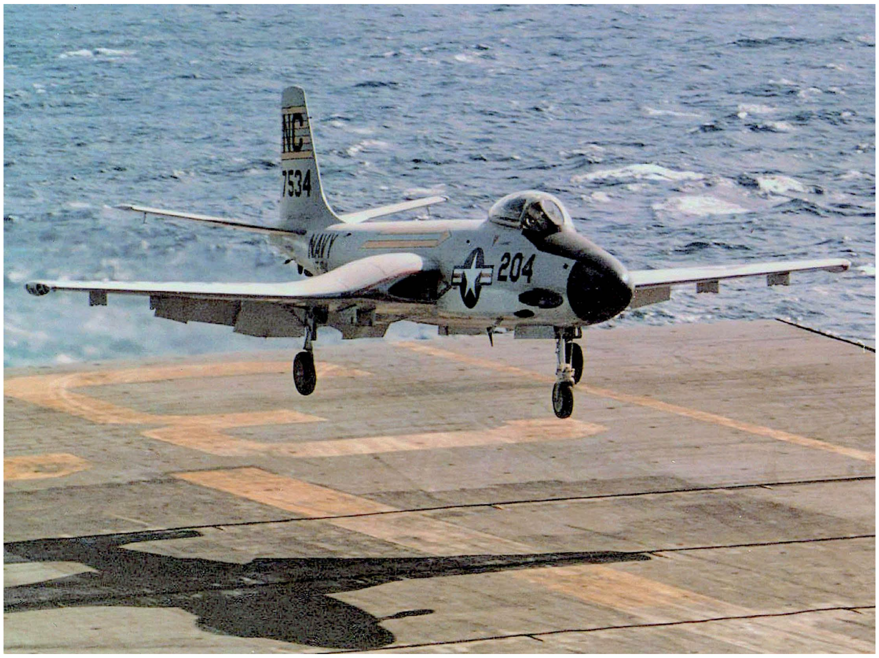


A VF-193 F2H-3 explodes on the ramp of *Oriskany* on 31 March 1954 after a ramp strike at the end of a routine mission over the Sea of Japan during the carrier's 1953–54 WestPac deployment. The cockpit section can be seen rolling ahead of the flames. The pilot, Lt Fred Repp, emerged from the aircraft uninjured. The CAG of CVG-19, Cdr James D 'Jig Dog' Ramage, who was standing on the bridge of the ship at the time of the accident, gave the following account of what he saw in *The Hook* many years later. 'Out of the corner of my eye I caught a glimpse of a yellow life jacket. I turned, and in utter disbelief watched Fred Repp walk into the pilot house! I looked at him in shock – his flight gear was spotless. The only words I could think of were, "My God, Fred, what happened?' His nonchalant reply was, "Hello, CAG. I don't know, sir, but I guess it was pretty colourful"' (*Terry Panopalis Collection*)

VF-194 – this unit was established on 18 March 1955 to become a jet fighter squadron, with an earlier VF-194, which had actually deployed twice to the Korean War with AD Skyraiders as part of ATG-1, having been re-designated VA-196 only 14 days earlier on 4 May 1955. The ‘Banshees’, as the unit was nicknamed, were equipped with F2H-3s in August 1955 and VF-194 took this type on both of its WestPac deployments with the aircraft. The first was with CVG-9 on board *Oriskany* in 1956 and the second with ATG-3 on board *Kearsarge* in 1957–58. VF-194 was disestablished on 19 April 1958, just eight days after its second deployment with the F2H-3 had come to an end.

VF-52 – a veteran of three Korean War deployments with the F9F-2, VF-52 also completed a WestPac with the aircraft in 1954–55 prior to transitioning to the F2H-3 in May 1955. The ‘Sealancers’ subsequently made three Banshee-equipped deployments with ATG-1, with the first of these taking place in 1956 on board USS *Lexington* (CVA-16). A short deployment on board *Bennington* to the Hawaiian operating area in the central Pacific followed in mid 1958. Finally, the ‘Sealancers’ embarked in *Ticonderoga* in October 1958 for a four-month WestPac. On 23 February 1959, nine days after returning home, VF-52 was disestablished.

VF-102 – established on 1 July 1955 and equipped with F2H-4s, VF-102 completed a shakedown cruise with ATG-202 on board *Bennington* in early 1956. The ‘Diamondbacks’ undertook their only deployment with Banshees on board *Randolph*, heading for the Mediterranean with ATG-202 on 14 July 1956. Soon after returning home on 19 February 1957, VF-102 transitioned to the F4D-1 Skyray.



F2H-3 BuNo 127534, assigned to VF-194, rapidly closes on *Kearsarge*'s flightdeck in 1957 – the year that two-letter tail codes were assigned to carrier air groups and air task groups. VF-194 was assigned to ATG-3 at this time, and it made a WestPac deployment embarked in *Kearsarge* between August 1957 and April 1958. This VF-194 was a relatively new squadron, having only been formed in 1955 after the previous Skyraider-equipped VF-194 was re-designated VA-196. The new VF-194 did not last long, being disestablished in April 1958 (*Peter Davies Collection*)

VF-114 – re-designated from VA-114 on 15 February 1950 and equipped with F4U-4 Corsairs, VF-114 made two deployments to the Korean War with CVG-11 embarked in *Philippine Sea* in 1950–51 and 1951–52 before transitioning to the F9F-5 in October 1952. After two Panther deployments with CVG-11 on board *Kearsarge*, the 'Executioners' switched to F2H-3s in June 1955. VF-114 made just one WestPac deployment with the Banshee as part of CVG-11 on board *Essex* in 1956–57, returning home in January 1957 and then switching to the F3H-2 Demon.

VF-213 – this unit was established on 22 June 1955 and equipped with F2H-3s. The 'Black Lions' also made just one deployment with Banshees, with CVG-21 on board *Bon Homme Richard* to the Western Pacific during 1956–57. In July 1957, VF-213 upgraded to the F4D-1 Skyray.

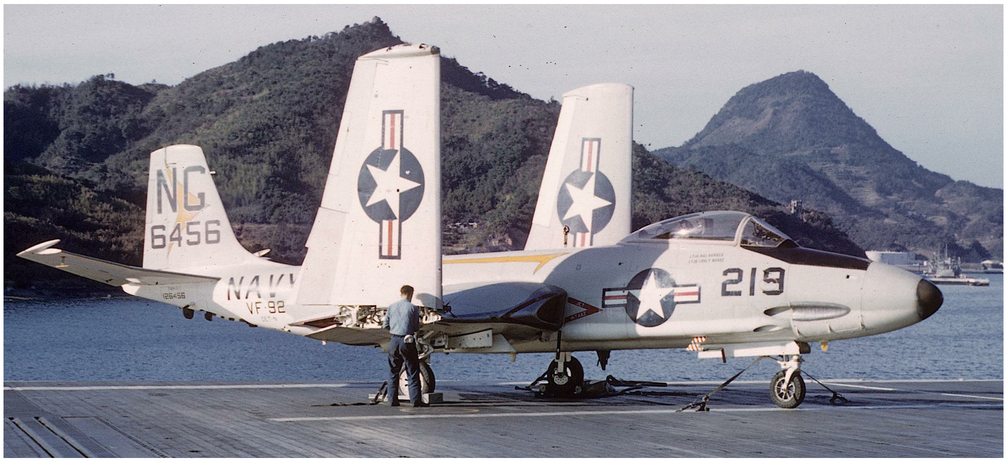
VF-64 – a veteran of four Korean War deployments with the F4U-4 as part of CVG-2, the unit switched to jets with the acquisition of F9F-5s in December 1952. After two Panther deployments, the 'Freelancers' received F2H-3s in

September 1955. The squadron made only one WestPac deployment with Banshees, with CVG-2 on board *Shangri-La* during 1956–57. VF-64 traded its F2H-3s for F3H-2 Demons from December 1957. The squadron was re-designated VF-21 on 1 July 1959.

VF-92 – established on 26 March 1952 as an F4U-4 squadron, VF-92 completed a deployment to the Korean War with CVG-5 on board *Valley Forge* in 1952–53 prior to becoming a jet squadron with F9F-2s. After one deployment with Panthers, again with CVG-5, on board *Philippine Sea*, the 'Silver Kings' reverted to propeller-driven aircraft in the form of AD-4B Skyraiders for a WestPac deployment with ATG-3 on board *Shangri-La* in early 1956. VF-92 reverted to jets, now F9F-5s, following the completion of the cruise, before switching to F2H-3s in October 1956. The unit next undertook a WestPac deployment in November 1958 when it provided a handful of fighters as Detachment N to *Yorktown*, which was now operating as an ASW carrier. Meanwhile, the rest of VF-92 had begun upgrading to the F3H-2 Demon from September 1958. VF-92 was re-designated VF-54 on 1 June 1962 before reverting to VF-92 on 15 October 1963.

VF-121 – originally reserve squadron VF-781, this unit was mobilised in July 1950 and deployed to the Korean War zone twice with CVG-102 while equipped with F9F-2s (1951) and F9F-5s (1952–53), respectively. It was re-designated VF-121 on 4 February 1953, while CVG-102 was re-designated CVG-12. After the war, the 'Pacemakers' made transitions through the F9F-6 and F9F-8 Cougars and the FJ-3M Fury, undertaking single WestPac deployments with each type through to October 1957. VF-121 then became the replacement air group squadron for the F11F Tiger and the F3H Demon, with the squadron also operating some F3D-2Ts and F2H-4s – the latter for much of 1958 – to provide training for future fleet Naval Aviators.

VF-122 – originally reserve squadron VF-783, this unit was mobilised on 2 August 1950 and deployed to the Korean War with its F4U-4s as part of CVG-102 on board *Bon Homme Richard* in 1951. It re-equipped with F9F-5s in 1952 and, while still assigned to CVG-102, embarked in *Oriskany* and returned to TF 77 in September of that year. Five months into its combat deployment, the squadron was re-designated VF-122 (and the carrier air group became CVG-12) on 4 February 1953. Another WestPac was undertaken with CVG-12, embarked in *Boxer*, in 1954, the 'Black Angels' having then received F9F-6s. Transferred to ATG-3 in 1955 and re-equipped with F9F-8s, VF-122 completed a WestPac with *Shangri-La* during the first half of 1956. Upon returning home, the unit switched to F2H-3s, although the Banshees were replaced by F3H-2N Demons in 1957. VF-122 was disestablished on 10 April 1958.



VF-92 F2H-3 BuNo 126456 is framed by a harbour somewhere in the western Pacific as it sits on the flightdeck of *Yorktown* in January 1958. The 'Silver Kings' deployed Detachment N on board the ASW carrier between November 1958 and May 1959 while the rest of the squadron was in transition to the F3H Demon. This aircraft had previously served with VF-64 and VAW-11 prior to joining VF-92 (*Terry Panopalis Collection*)

US MARINE CORPS BANSHEE FIGHTER SQUADRONS

The US Marine Corps equipped five of its fighter squadrons with Banshees, and they are listed below in the order that they received the aircraft.

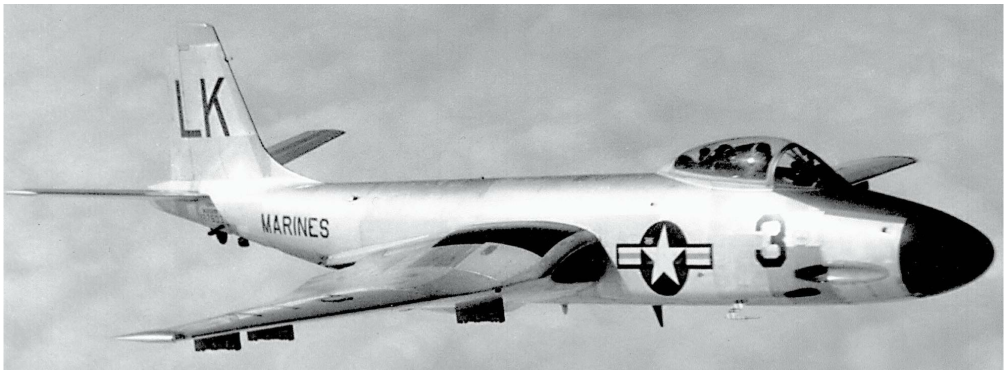
VMF-122 – this unit flew Corsairs until it switched to FH-1 Phantoms in November 1947. F2H-1s replaced the Phantoms in 1949, followed by F2H-2s. The squadron was tapped for one of the Banshee's earliest deployments, teamed with VF-62 on board *Oriskany* with CVG-4 for its cruise to the Mediterranean in 1951. Upon returning home, VMF-122 switched to the F9F-5 in October 1951.

VMF-224 – also a Corsair squadron, VMF-224 swapped its F4U-5s for F2H-2s in 1949. Its time in Banshees was brief, with the unit switching to the F9F

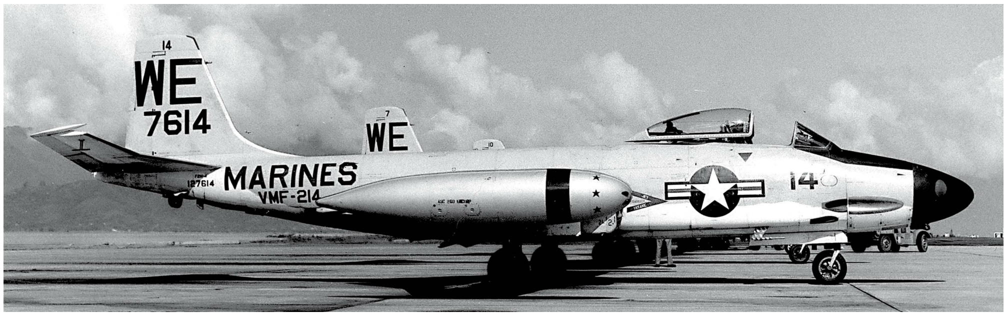
Panther in 1952.

VMF-114 – originally Marine Night Fighter Squadron (VMF(N)) 114 equipped with F4U-5N/NL Corsairs, the unit became VMF-114 on 1 June 1953 as it neared the end of a Mediterranean cruise with CVG-10 on board *Tarawa*. The 'Death Dealers' made the transition to the F2H-4 shortly thereafter, and in January 1955 the Banshees were replaced by F9F-8 Cougars.

VMF(AW)-214 – yet another unit that was equipped with F4U-4s at the start of the war in Korea, the 'Black Sheep' were then designated VMF-214. It became the first US Marine Corps squadron to see combat in the conflict when it went into action from USS *Sicily* (CVE-118) in August 1950. Two more combat tours were completed prior to VMF-214 switching to Panthers (initially F9F-5s, followed by F9F-2s) in 1952. In 1953, the 'Black Sheep' received new F2H-4s. The squadron was re-designated VMF(AW)-214 in December 1956. Stationed at MCAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, the 'Black Sheep' contributed to the air defence of Hawaii, undertaking strip alert at Hickam Air Force Base in concert with F-86 Sabres of the Hawaiian Air National Guard. The squadron completed a WestPac deployment with ATG-2 on board USS *Hancock* (ATG-2) in 1957. On 9 July that same year, and while still on cruise, the squadron was re-designated VMA-214. Upon returning from deployment in September 1957, the 'Black Sheep' commenced transitioning to the FJ-4B Fury, completing the process by March 1958.



VMF-114 F2H-4 BuNo 127603 was photographed in flight during the mid-1950s. Its weapon stations and wing root walkways are painted, while most of the aircraft is in natural aluminium. The 'Death Dealers'' tenure with the Banshee was brief, lasting less than two years, before the unit transitioned to the F9F-8 Cougar in early 1957 (*Peter Davies Collection*)



VMF-214 F2H-4 BuNo 127614 sits on the ramp at MCAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, in March 1956. In December of that year the squadron was re-designated VMF(AW)-214. One of its roles was the air defence of Hawaii, a tasking the unit shared with Air National Guard F-86 Sabres. BuNo 127614 was transferred to NAS North Island-based VAW-11 following its service with the US Marine Corps, and the jet was destroyed in a fatal accident on 22 February 1959 when Lt James F Wyley flew into high ground in the Santa Cruz Mountains, in California, in poor weather (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

VMF(AW)-533 – equipped with F7F-3N/4N Tigercats and designated VMF-533, this unit was not deployed to the Korean conflict. Instead, it trained crews for VMF(N)-513, which saw considerable action in-theatre. In May 1953, the squadron received F2H-4s. In July 1955, the ‘Black Diamonds’ deployed a detachment of Banshees on board *Bennington* for a brief at-sea period. The full squadron subsequently deployed to the Mediterranean in January 1957 with ATG-182 on board *Lake Champlain*. During the course of the cruise the unit was re-designated VMF(AW)-533, but in September 1957 it became VMA-533 and transitioned to the F9F Cougar.

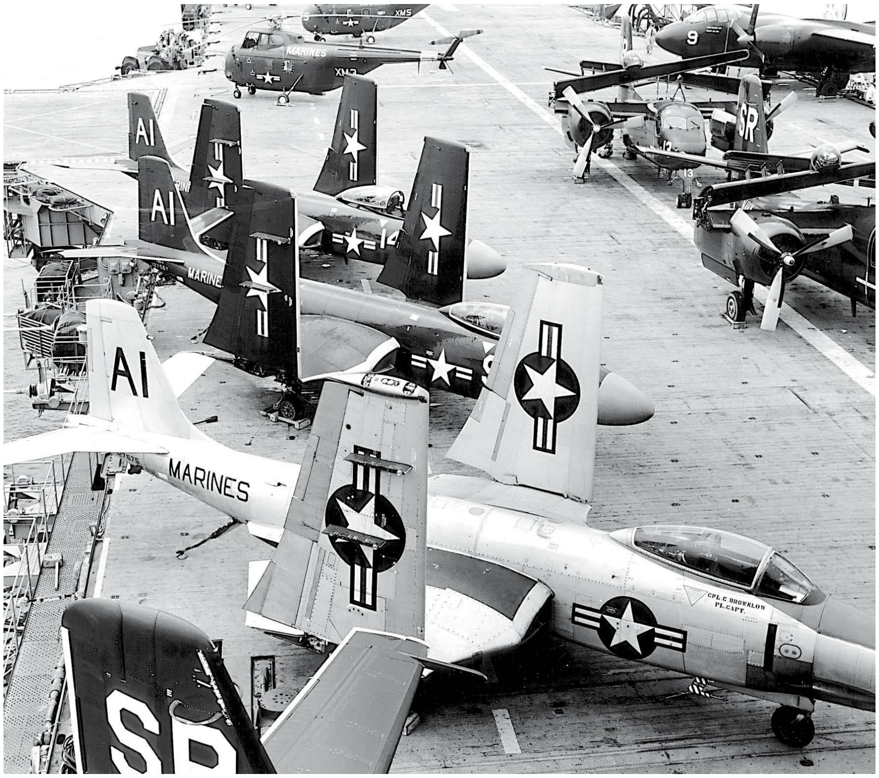
FLEET OPERATIONS AND PHASE OUT

Banshee squadrons were also on hand during some of the flashpoints of the Cold War that immediately followed the conflict in Korea. For example, VF-12, on a round-the-world deployment on board *Midway* in 1954–55, supported Nationalist Chinese forces in the evacuation of the Dachen Islands, in the Taiwan Strait, when they came under communist Chinese artillery fire in February 1955. The following year, VF-152, operating off *Yorktown*, flew night patrols over the disputed Dachen Islands. In July 1958, VF-11 on board *Essex* provided cover during the Lebanese Civil War and, two months later, flew patrols over the Taiwan Strait during the Quemoy-Matsu Crisis. In 1959, by then VA-152 (formerly VF-152), operating from *Bennington*, again patrolled over the Taiwan Strait during tensions between the two Chinas.

In the end, only ten US Navy and two US Marine Corps fighter squadrons operated the F2H-2, with some switching to different types of fighters, others upgrading to the F2H-3/4 and a handful ending their service lives with the F2H-2 as their last type. The F2H-3/4s were superseded in fleet fighter and attack squadrons from the mid-1950s by the F4D-1 Skyray, F3H-2 Demon and F9F-8 Cougar. However, from 1952, the Banshees continued to be used in the all-weather fighter and nuclear delivery roles until 1959. A small number were also tasked with providing Sidewinder-armed fighter protection for ASW carriers.

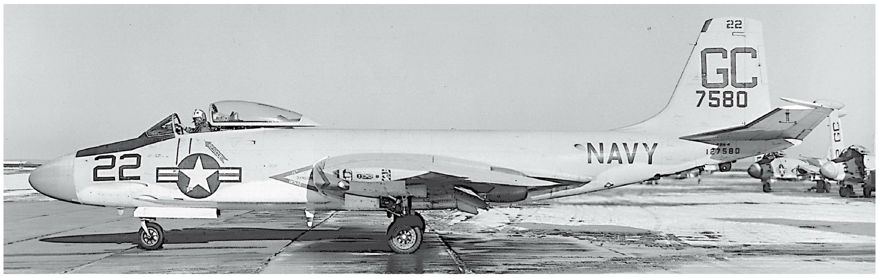
The development of specialised ASW carriers had commenced in World War 2 in an effort to combat the threat posed by Axis submarines. Escort carriers (CVEs) had initially been used, and this remained the case immediately post-war. As the open ocean air threat initially declined after the war, the aircraft assigned to ASW CVEs evolved from TBF/TBM Avengers with F4F/FM Wildcats for air defence to designed-for-the-purpose ASW aircraft such as the AF Guardian, followed by the S2F Tracker, with no organic interceptors assigned.

That benign environment changed with the advent of Soviet strike aircraft such as the M-4 ‘Bison’, Tu-95 ‘Bear’ and Tu-16 ‘Badger’ bombers, many of which were soon armed with cruise missiles. As some Essex-class vessels were converted into ASW carriers for hunter-killer groups, the US Navy began assigning detachments of attack or fighter aircraft to some deployments to provide air-intercept capability (see **Appendices**). The first ASW carrier to embark Banshees was *Tarawa*, which included F2H-2-equipped Detachment 38 from VA-172 on a North Atlantic cruise from August to October 1957. Records indicate that this was the last carrier deployment of the F2H-2 day fighter.



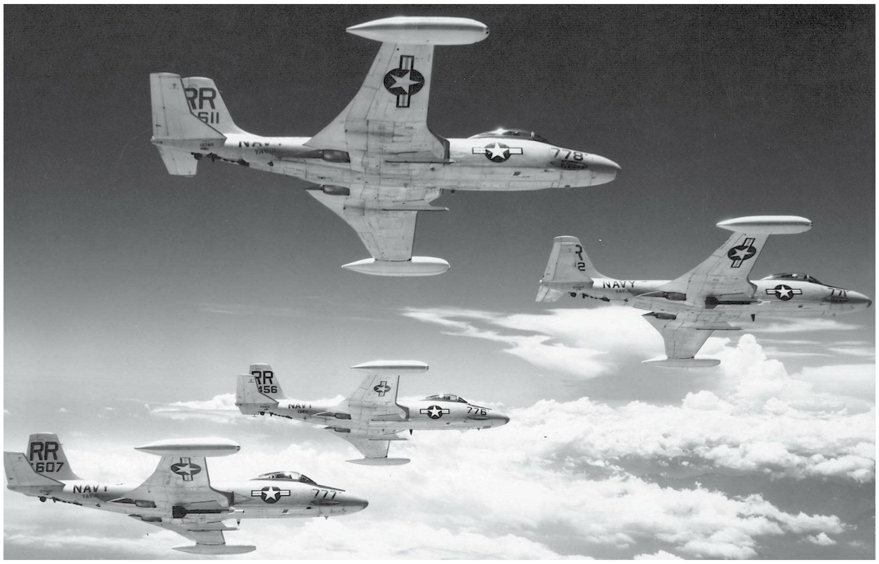
Three VMF(N)-533 F2H-4s (with BuNo 127675 in the foreground) are seen chained down to the flightdeck of *Ticonderoga* in September 1955. The 'Black Diamonds' only made one carrier deployment with the Banshee, and that was to the Mediterranean in 1957 with ATG-182 on board *Lake Champlain*. US Marine Corps Banshee squadrons retained their assigned tail code – in this case, 'AI' – when embarked in a carrier (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

VF-92, equipped with F2H-4s, provided a detachment to *Yorktown* for operations near Hawaii in July–August 1958 and for the WestPac that followed from November 1958 through to May 1959. VF(AW)-4, a squadron which by 1958 included a large number of F2H-3/4s, also flew AD-5/5Ns. The squadron despatched 12 Skyraider-equipped deployments (including two while the squadron was designated VC-4) on board ASW carriers, and one such detachment also operated F9F-5 Panthers. For reasons that remain a mystery, VF(AW)-4's Banshees were never deployed on an ASW carrier according to available records.



F2H-4 BuNo 127850 of VF(AW)-4 taxies over a snowy ramp at NAS Quonset Point, Rhode Island, on 27 January 1959. Re-designated from VC-4 on 2 July 1956, VF(AW)-4 was equipped with a large number of Banshees, yet there is no official record available of it making a deployment under that designation (*Steve Ginter Collection*)

However, one other squadron assigned to provide fighter cover for an ASW carrier was the most unusual operator of the Banshee. Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron (VAW) 11, which flew AD-5W ‘Guppy’ Skyraiders, was assigned 12 F2H-3/4s. It despatched four F2H-3s on a single WestPac deployment with Detachment P on board *Hornet* from April to October 1959. These aircraft were armed with Sidewinder missiles. When the detachment returned home on 10 October 1959, it marked the last carrier deployment of the Banshee on board a US Navy aircraft carrier.



F2H-3/4s assigned to VAW-11’s Detachment P fly in close formation whilst on a training mission from *Hornet* during the ASW carrier’s WestPac in 1959. Two of the aircraft carry single Sidewinder missiles. VAW-11 was assigned F2H-3/4s to provide all-weather fighter protection for ASW carriers operating in the western Pacific, but Detachment P’s 1959 WestPac on board *Hornet* was the only such deployment undertaken by the unit (*Steve Ginter collection*)

Like many naval aircraft, the Banshee saw service with a variety of utility and research and development units, although less so than some other types;

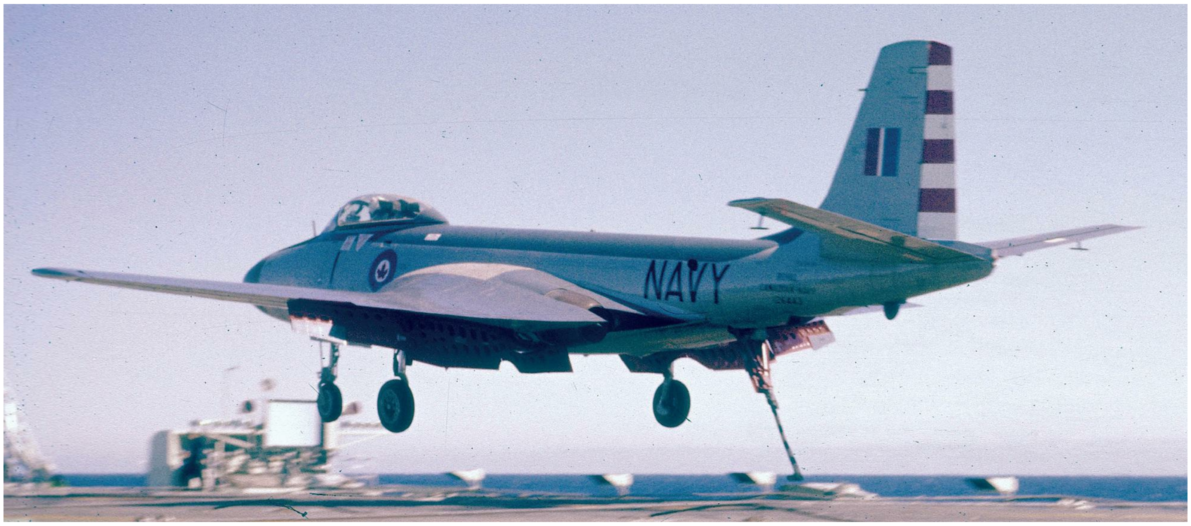
- Utility Squadron (VU) 1 – F2H-2P
- Utility Squadron (VU) 2 – F2H-4
- Air Development Squadron (VX) 3 – F2H-1, F2H-2, F2H-2P, F2H-3, F2H-4
- Air Development Squadron (VX) 5 – F2H-2, F2H-2B, F2H-3
- Naval Air Development Unit (NADU) Johnsville, Pennsylvania – F2H-2
- Naval Air Test Center (NATC) Patuxent River, Maryland – F2H-1, F2H-2, F2H-2N, F2H-3, F2H-4
- Naval Air Missile Test Center (NAMTC) Point Mugu, California – F2H-2P, F2H-3M
- Naval Ordnance Test Station (NOTS) Inyokern, California – F2H-2, F2H-2B, F2H-2P, F2H-3
- Naval Combat Information Center (CIC) Officers School, Glynco, Georgia – F2H-2, F2H-3, F2H-4
- National Advisory Committee on Aeronautics (NACA) – F2H-3

Numerous Fleet Air Support Squadrons (FASRONs) also had Banshees on hand, although these aircraft served only as a pool for maintaining and providing replacement jets to fleet squadrons.

CHAPTER SIX

CANADIAN OPERATIONS AND RETIREMENT

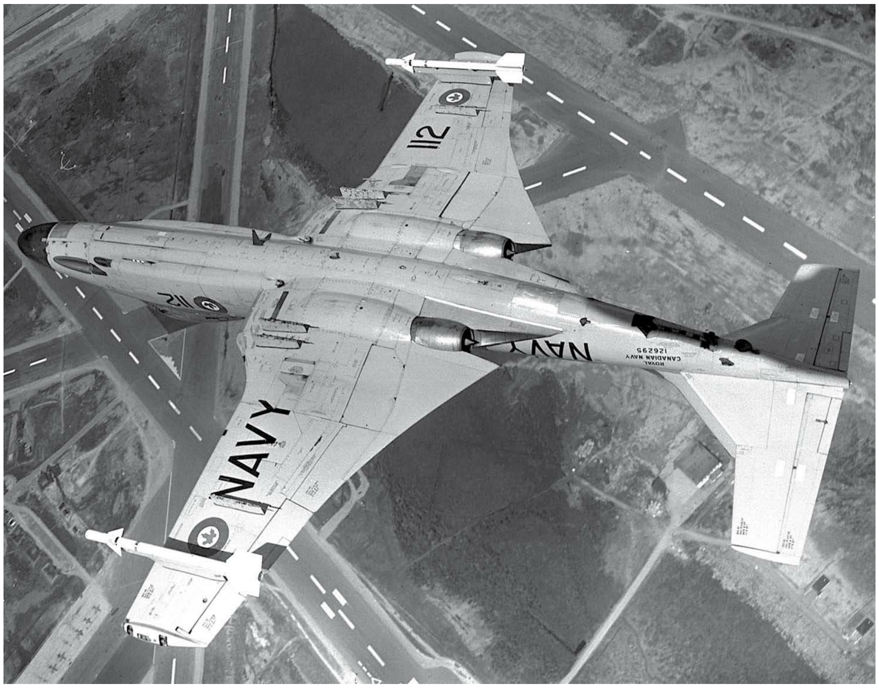
While some USAF jet fighter types saw significant service with foreign air arms, of all the operational jet fighters used by the US Navy during the 1950s, until the F8U Crusader arrived in service, only two flew with foreign air arms. The F9F Panther served with the Argentine Navy (two F9F-8T Cougars provided two-seat training) from 1958, the jet also seeing action during the 1962–63 Argentine Navy Revolt.



VF-871 F2H-3 BuNo 126433 reaches for an arrestor wire on board *Bonaventure* in 1958. This unit was merged with VF-870 in March 1959 after aircraft attrition made a single squadron more logical (*Terry Panopalis Collection*)

The other type was the F2H-3 Banshee, which served with the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) as its only jet fighter. The RCN's last aircraft carrier was HMCS *Bonaventure* (CVL-22), a Colossus-class vessel laid down on 27 November 1943 in Northern Ireland for the Royal Navy as HMS *Powerful*. Construction was halted at the end of World War 2, but the hull was procured by Canada in April 1952 and completed as a Majestic-class ship with an angled deck and steam catapults, being commissioned on 17 January 1957.

Prior to the RCN becoming equipped with a carrier, it operated piston-engined Hawker Sea Fury FB 11 fighters that it planned to replace with 60 jet fighters, 16 of which would be embarked in *Bonaventure*. The service wanted to procure 60 new-production F2H-3 Banshees from McDonnell in order to equip two fleet squadrons with 16 aircraft each, plus 28 more to account for expected attrition. The RCN sealed the deal with McDonnell, which agreed to tack on the production of the aircraft after it had delivered the final F2H-3s ordered by the US Navy. However, the Canadian government subsequently cancelled the order for budget austerity reasons, so the RCN procured former US Navy F2H-3s instead.



F2H-3 BuNo 126295 of VF-870 is put through its paces over RCNAS Shearwater in June 1959. The aircraft is armed with two AIM-9B Sidewinder missiles, the RCN preferring to use the Banshee's outer wing stations for Sidewinders, whereas the US Navy bolted the weapons to the inboard pylons. Although Canadian Banshees practiced air-to-ground ordnance delivery, fleet air defence was their primary role (*Patrick Martin Collection*)

Four F2H-3s assigned to VF-870's Grey Ghosts aerial demonstration team fly in a diamond formation over *Bonaventure*. The team's distinctive name was inspired by the colour scheme adopted for the aircraft by the RCN. With the Canadian Banshee fleet being too small to maintain a dedicated contingent of aircraft for airshows, the team flew whichever jets were serviceable whenever a display was required (*Public Domain*)

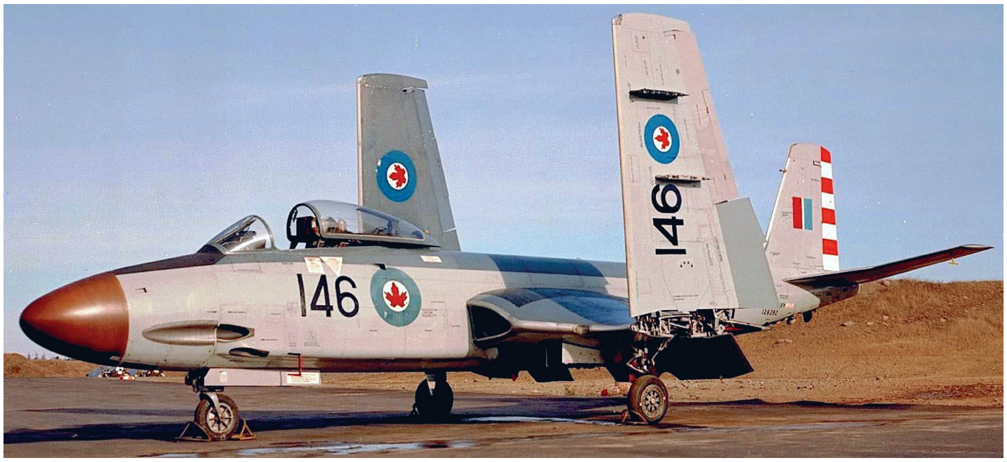
The high demand in the US fleet for F2H-3s given delays in the replacement all-weather fighters in the form of the F3H Demon and F4D Skyray slowed the availability of Banshees for transfer to the RCN. Accordingly, given the adjustment in anticipated attrition, the RCN reduced the requirement to 54 Banshees. Another reduction occurred when the RCN decided to use 15 Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) CT-133 (Lockheed T-33) Silver Stars for jet training. This decision further reduced the Banshee requirement to 39. However, with the training burden of the RCAF and NATO, only four CT-133s were spared for the RCN.

Before the arrival of RCN's Banshees, the future pilots began training with the US Navy's Fleet All-Weather Training Unit Atlantic in Key West, Florida. There, they flew in F3D-2 Skyknights for radar air-intercept training prior to undertaking Banshee conversion with US Navy fleet squadron VF-41.

Deliveries of the ex-US Navy F2H-3s commenced on 25 November 1955 and were completed on 16 June 1959. According to historian Patrick Martin, 'All were noted as received in poor shape, having been well used'. The 39 F2H-3s delivered to the RCN were BuNos 126294, 295, 306, 310, 313, 327, 330, 331, 333, 334, 335, 337, 339, 343, 346, 347, 361, 381, 382, 390, 392, 400, 402, 403, 414, 415, 422, 428, 429, 434, 443, 444, 446, 449, 454, 464, 469 and 488 and 127510.

With *Bonaventure* based on Canada's east coast, the RCN formed two fleet fighter squadrons to operate the Banshees from Royal Canadian Naval Air Station (RCNAS) Shearwater in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia. 870 Naval Air Squadron, which had been disbanded on 30 March 1954 after its last deployment on board HMCS *Magnificent* (CVL-21), was re-formed on 1 November 1955 and re-designated VF-870 in the style of the US Navy. VF-870 was equipped with ten F2H-3s, becoming the RCN's first jet squadron. The squadron's first Banshee commanding officer, Lt Cdr Robert H Falls, would subsequently become the Canadian Armed Forces' Chief of Staff in 1977.

A second Banshee squadron, VF-871 (not to be confused with the US Navy reserve squadron VF-871) was formed in 1956 at Shearwater. Discarding its Sea Furies in August of that year, it shared some of VF-870's Banshees for training until its own F2H-3s began arriving in January 1957. Banshees also equipped development squadron VX-10 at Shearwater.

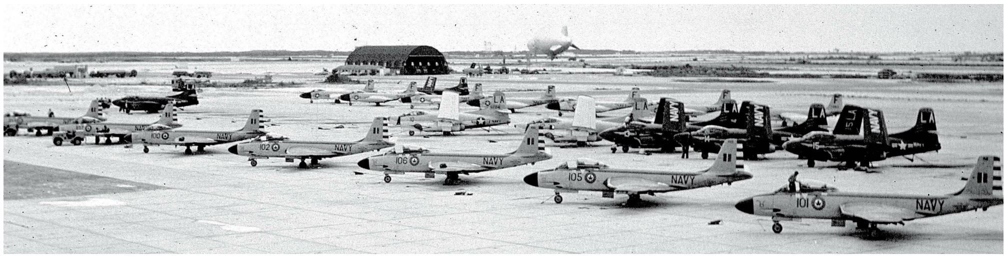


F2H-3 BuNo 126392 of VF-871 basks in the warm sunshine at RCNAS Shearwater in the summer of 1958. The Banshee had been sold to the RCN in November 1955, and following initial service with VF-870 as aircraft '100', it was transferred to VF-871. The jet returned to VF-870 following the merger of the two units on 16 March 1959, and it was struck off charge on 14 February 1962 (*Public Domain*)

The two RCN fighter squadrons shared operations from *Bonaventure*, with VF-870 sending its Banshees to sea for the first time on 7 September 1957. Whilst embarked, the jets shared the carrier's flightdeck with S2F Tracker ASW aircraft and HO4S ASW helicopters. Most of *Bonaventure*'s operations were in the North Atlantic in support of NATO, where the Banshee's all-weather capability could prove useful against Soviet long-range aircraft. VF-871 first deployed with its Banshees on *Bonaventure* in February 1958.

When not deployed, the RCN Banshees were used as air defence interceptors for the North American Air Defense Command. Like their US counterparts, the RCN Banshees were armed with Sidewinders from 1958 onward. Of note, *Bonaventure*'s hangar deck ceiling was so low that the Banshees could not normally operate from the ship with tip tanks. Unlike their US Navy counterparts, the RCN F2H-3s were never fitted with aerial refuelling probes.

In part because of attrition, VF-871 was merged with VF-870 on 16 March 1959, leaving it as the RCN's only deploying jet squadron. Operations continued until 3 August 1962, when VF-870 undertook its last Banshee flight. The squadron was disbanded on 7 September 1962. VX-10 had also retired its Banshees by then. During its RCN service, no fewer than 12 of the 29 Banshees acquired were lost in mishaps. The RCN never acquired another jet fighter for *Bonaventure*, although the vessel continued to serve as an ASW carrier until it was decommissioned on 30 July 1970.



RCN Banshees of VF-870 are seen on the ramp at NAS Key West, Florida, in February 1957 along with F3D-2s Skyknights and F2H-3/4s assigned to the US Navy's Fleet All-Weather Training Unit Atlantic. Both VF-870 and VF-871 went through radar intercept procedures training with US Navy F3Ds from Key West (*Terry Panopolis Collection*)

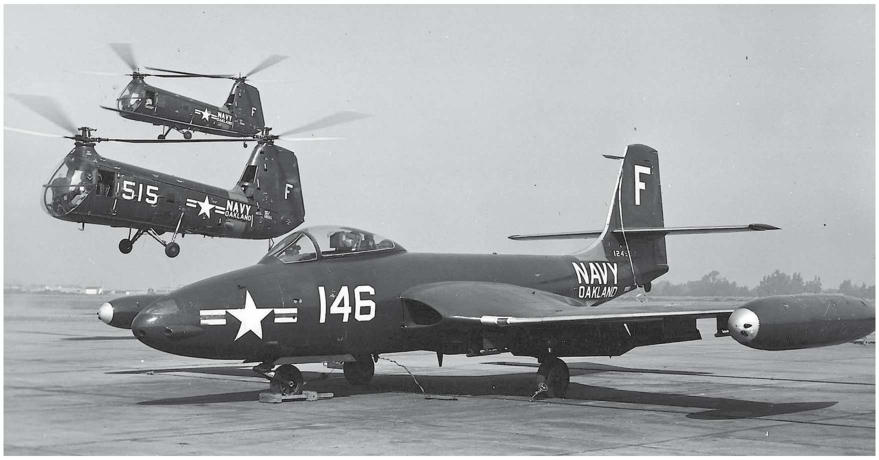
US NAVAL RESERVE SERVICE

Like many types of naval aircraft, the F2H Banshee was used to equip reserve units as the jets were replaced by newer fighters. The tenure of individual types was often short in the 1950s, given the rapid replacement of older jet types with more modern ones during this technologically turbulent period. The fleet's F2H-1s were shuffled off to reserve units as soon as F2H-2s became available to the active component. They were joined by F2H-2s as F2H-3/4s reached the fleet in quantity.

The reserve jets were assigned directly to Naval Air Reserve Training Units (NARTUs) at certain naval air stations, from which they were flown by squadrons that drilled at those sites. F2H-1s and F2H-2s equipped NARTUs at Glenview, in Illinois, Los Alamitos, in California, Niagara Falls, in New York, Oakland, in California, Norfolk, in Virginia, and St Louis, in Missouri.

The 'Big Banjo' also served in the Naval Air Reserve, but the scope of its use was much more limited than that of the F2H-1/2. NARTU Norfolk was equipped with F2H-3/4s, although the extent of their use, if at all, is not recorded. NARTU Oakland was the only other reserve unit to operate the F2H-3/4, which its resident VF-876 and VF-879 acquired from May 1958. The latter unit made the transition to the A4D-1 Skyhawk in December 1960 and was re-designated VA-879. VF-876 also upgraded to the A4D-1, being re-designated VA-879. NARTU Oakland retired its last F2H-3/4s in March 1961.

Some stored F2H-3s and F2H-4s were re-designated F-2Cs and F-2Ds, respectively, under the new designation system instituted in September 1962, but none are known to have actually operated under the new designations.



F2H-2 BuNo 124957 is joined by two HUP-2 helicopters at Oakland, all three machines being assigned to the NARTU based at the airfield on the eastern shoreline of San Francisco Bay. F2H-2s were passed on to a number of reserve units as they were replaced in the fleet by F2H-3/4s (*Peter Mersky Collection*)

The Banshee was the last straight-winged fighter in US Navy service and the only jet fighter of any type in RCN service. By 1962, it was an anachronism, with carrier decks full of F4D Skyrays, F3H Demons, F8U Crusaders, A4D Skyhawks, A3D Skywarriors and A3J Vigilantes. But it was a part of a lineage that gave the fleet its first widely used jet all-weather capability, one that eventually brought to fruition the all-weather McDonnell F4H Phantom II, which would become a star interceptor over the world’s oceans and an effective strike aircraft in the skies over Vietnam. The ‘Banjo’s’ pioneering carrier-based nuclear weapons capability gave the US Navy’s aircraft carriers their first reliable nuclear strike option – a remarkable achievement for a first generation naval fighter.

APPENDICES

F2H BANSHEE FIGHTER SQUADRON DEPLOYMENTS

Dates	Ship	Carrier Air Group	Modex	Aircraft	Cruise
VF-11					
20/3/51–6/10/51	*Coral Sea*	CVG-1	T100	F2H-2	Mediterranean
11/8/52–11/3/53	*Kearsarge*	CVG-101/14	T100*	F2H-2	Korean War
7/7/54–20/12/54	*Coral Sea*	CVG-10	P100	F2H-4	Mediterranean
13/8/56–11/2/57	*Coral Sea*	CVG-10	P100	F2H-4	Mediterranean
2/2/58–17/11/58	*Essex*	ATG-201	AP100	F2H-4	World
VF-12					
20/3/51–6/10/51	*Coral Sea*	CVG-1	T200	F2H-2	Mediterranean
24/5/52–11/10/52	*Wasp*	CVG-1	T200	F2H-2	Mediterranean
11/6/53–3/12/53	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-1	T200	F2H-2	Mediterranean
27/12/54–14/7/55	*Midway*	CVG-1	T200	F2H-2	World
VF-22					
28/11/51–11/6/52	*Tarawa*	CVG-8	E200	F2H-2	Mediterranean
26/4/53–4/12/53	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-4	F200	F2H-2	Korean War
28/5/55–22/11/55	*Intrepid*	CVG-4	F100	F2H-2	Mediterranean
18/8/56–15/10/56	*Saratoga*	CVG-4	F100	F2H-4	Shakedown
13/11/56–12/12/56	*Saratoga*	CVG-4	F100	F2H-4	Eastern Atlantic/Suez Crisis
1/7/57–24/2/58	*Randolph*	CVG-4	AD100	F2H-4	Mediterranean
VF-23					
1/12/53–12/6/54	*Essex*	ATG-2	M100	F2H-3	Western Pacific
19/3/56–13/9/56	*Yorktown*	ATG-4	M200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-31					
4/1/54–4/8/54	*Midway*	CVG-6	K100**	F2H-3	Mediterranean
4/11/55–2/8/56	*Ticonderoga*	CVG-3	K100	F2H-3	Mediterranean
VF-34					
28/8/52–4/2/53	*Leyte*	CVG-3	K100	F2H-2	Mediterranean
30/11/54–18/6/55	*Randolph*	ATG-181	B400	F2H-2	Mediterranean
VF-41					
30/11/54–18/6/55	*Randolph*	ATG-181	B300	F2H-3	Mediterranean
24/1/56–31/3/56	*Forrestal*	ATG-181	I100	F2H-3	Shakedown
3/10/56–23/5/57	*Bennington*	ATG-181	I100	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-44					
28/5/55–22/11/55	*Intrepid*	CVG-4	F400	F2H-2	Mediterranean
VF-52					
28/5/56–20/12/56	*Lexington*	ATG-1	U200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
26/5/58–6/58	*Bennington*	ATG-1	NA200	F2H-3	Central Pacific
4/10/58–16/2/59	*Ticonderoga*	ATG-1	NA200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-62					
15/5/51–24/10/51	*Oriskany*	CVG-4	F100	F2H-2	Mediterranean
19/4/52–12/10/52	*Coral Sea*	CVG-4	F200	F2H-2	Mediterranean
26/4/53–4/12/53	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-4	F200	F2H-2	Korean War
7/7/54–20/12/54	*Coral Sea*	CVG-10	P200	F2H-2	Mediterranean
VF-64					
15/11/56–20/5/57	*Shangri-La*	CVG-2	M400	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-71					
16/9/53–21/2/54	*Bennington*	CVG- 7	L100	F2H-3	Mediterranean
4/5/55–10/12/55	*Hornet*	CVG-7	L100	F2H-3	Western Pacific
3/9/57–22/10/57	*Intrepid*	CVG-6	AF100	F2H-3	North Atlantic
2/9/58–12/3/59	*Randolph*	CVG-7	AG100	F2H-4	Mediterranean
VF-82					
28/9/54–22/4/55	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-8	E200	F2H-2/2B/2N	Mediterranean
12/3/56–5/9/56	*Intrepid*	CVG-8	E100	F2H-4	Mediterranean
Dates	**Ship**	**Carrier Air Group**	**Modex**	**Aircraft**	**Cruise**
VF-92					
16/9/57–25/4/58	*Ticonderoga*	CVG-9	NG200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
21/7/58–15/8/58	*Yorktown*	- (Det N)	NG200	F2H-3	Central Pacific
1/11/58–21/5/59	*Yorktown*	- (Det N)	NG200	F2H-3	Western Pacific

VF-101					
27/12/54–14/7/55	*Midway*	CVG-1	T100	F2H-2/2B	World
VF-102					
14/7/56–19/2/57	*Randolph*	ATG-202	X100	F2H-4	Mediterranean
VF-114					
16/7/56–26/1/57	*Essex*	CVG-11	V400	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-141					
3/2/54–6/8/54	*Randolph*	CVG-14	A100	F2H-3	Mediterranean
29/10/54–17/5/55	*Kearsarge*	CVG-5	S200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-152 (VA-152 after 1/8/58)					
1/7/54–28/2/55	*Yorktown*	CVG-15	H200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
23/4/56–15/10/56	*Wasp*	CVG-15	H200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
6/1/58–2/7/58	*Hornet*	ATG-4	ND200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
21/8/58–12/1/59	*Bennington*	ATG-4	ND200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-171					
9/9/50–1/2/51	*Coral Sea*	CVG-17	R100	F2H-2	Mediterranean
3/9/51–4/2/52	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	R100	F2H-2	Mediterranean
26/8/52–19/12/52	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	R100	F2H-2	North Atlantic/Mediterranean
16/9/53–1/5/54	*Wasp*	CVG-17	R100	F2H-3	World
5/4/55–29/9/55	*Coral Sea*	CVG-17	R100	F2H-3	Mediterranean
7/11/56–12/12/56	*Forrestal*	CVG-1	R100***	F2H-3/4	Eastern Atlantic/Suez Crisis
12/7/57–5/3/58	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	AL200	F2H-3/4	Mediterranean
VF-172 (VA-172 after 1/11/55)					
9/9/50–1/2/51	*Coral Sea*	CVG-17	R200	F2H-2	Mediterranean
26/6/51–25/3/52	*Essex*	CVG-5	R200****	F2H-2	Korean War
26/8/52–19/12/52	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	R200	F2H-2	North Atlantic/Mediterranean
16/9/53–1/5/54	*Wasp*	CVG-17	R200	F2H-2	World
5/4/55–29/9/55	*Coral Sea*	CVG-17	R200	F2H-2	Mediterranean
7/11/56–9/12/56	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	R200	F2H-2	Eastern Atlantic/Suez Crisis
3/9/57–22/10/57	*Saratoga*	CVG-7	L300	F2H-2	North Atlantic
19/8/57–22/10/57	*Tarawa*	- (Det 38)	AL300	F2H-2	North Atlantic
VF-193					
14/8/53–22/4/54	*Oriskany*	CVG-19	B300	F2H-3	Western Pacific
2/3/55–21/9/55	*Oriskany*	CVG-19	B300	F2H-3	Western Pacific
9/3/57–25/8/57	*Yorktown*	CVG-19	B300	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-194					
11/2/56–13/6/56	*Oriskany*	CVG-9	N100	F2H-3	Western Pacific
9/8/57–2/4/58	*Kearsarge*	ATG-3	NC200	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VF-213					
16/8/56–28/2/57	*Bon Homme Richard*	CVG-21	G300	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VMF-122					
15/5/51–24/10/51	*Oriskany*	CVG-4(F)	LC00	F2H-2	Mediterranean
VMF(AW)-214					
6/4/57–18/9/57	*Hancock*	ATG-2(NB)	WE300	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VMF(N)-533					
18/8/56–15/10/56	*Saratoga*	CVG-4	AI00	F2H-4	Shakedown
21/1/57–27/8/57	*Lake Champlain*	ATG-182	AI00	F2H-4	Mediterranean

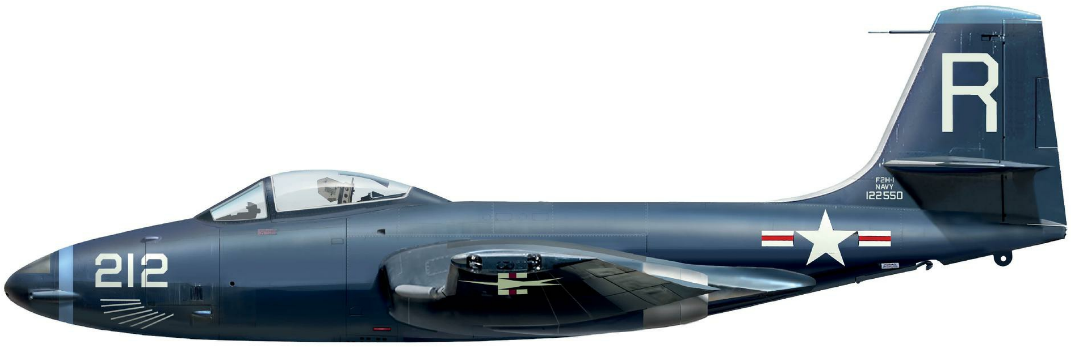
F2H–2P BANSHEE CARRIER DEPLOYMENTS

Dates	Ship	Carrier Air Group	Detachment	Cruise
VC-61 (VFP-61 after 2/7/56) (tail code PP)				
26/6/51–25/3/52	*Essex*	CVG-5	B	Korean War
31/10/51–3/7/52	*Valley Forge*	ATG-1	H	Korean War
31/12/51–8/8/52	*Philippine Sea*	CVG-11	C	Korean War
20/5/52–8/1/53	*Bon Homme Richard*	CVG-7	N	Korean War
16/6/52–6/2/53	*Essex*	ATG-2	I	Korean War
11/8/52–17/3/53	*Kearsarge*	CVG-101	F	Korean War
15/9/52–18/5/53	*Oriskany*	CVG-102	D	Korean War
30/3/53–28/11/53	*Boxer*	ATG-1	H	Korean War
1/7/53–18/1/54	*Kearsarge*	CVG-11	C	Western Pacific
3/8/53–3/3/54	*Yorktown*	CVG-2	A	Western Pacific
14/9/53–22/4/54	*Oriskany*	CVG-19	E	Western Pacific
11/5/54–12/12/54	*Hornet*	CVG-9	M	World
1/9/54–11/4/55	*Wasp*	ATG-1	H	Western Pacific
3/11/54–21/6/55	*Essex*	CVG-2	A	Western Pacific
2/3/55–21/9/55	*Oriskany*	CVG-19	E	Western Pacific
29/10/55–17/5/56	*Kearsarge*	CVG-5	B	Western Pacific
5/1/56–23/6/56	*Shangri-La*	ATG-3	J	Western Pacific
19/3/56–13/9/56	*Yorktown*	ATG-4	K	Western Pacific
16/8/56–28/2/57	*Bon Homme Richard*	CVG-21	L	Western Pacific
6/4/57–18/9/57	*Hancock*	ATG-2	I	Western Pacific
16/9/57–25/4/58	*Ticonderoga*	CVG-9	M	Western Pacific
VC-62 (VFP-62 after 2/7/56) (tail code PL until 2/7/56, when changed to GA)				
3/9/51–4/2/52	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	7	Mediterranean
28/11/51–11/6/52	*Tarawa*	CVG-8	32	Mediterranean
9/1/52–5/5/52	*Midway*	CVG-6	5	Mediterranean
19/4/52–12/10/52	*Coral Sea*	CVG-4	6	Mediterranean
24/5/52–11/10/52	*Wasp*	CVG-1	38	Mediterranean
26/8/52–8/10/52	*Midway*	CVG-6	5	North Atlantic
26/8/52–19/12/52	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	7	North Atlantic/Mediterranean
28/8/52–4/2/53	*Leyte*	CVG-3	3	Mediterranean
31/12/52–19/5/53	*Midway*	CVG-6	5	Mediterranean
26/4/53–4/12/53	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-4	44	Korean War/Mediterranean
26/4/53–21/10/53	*Coral Sea*	CVG-8	6	Mediterranean
11/6/53–3/12/53	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-1	7	Mediterranean
16/9/53–1/5/54	*Wasp*	CVG-17	38	World
16/9/53–21/2/54	*Bennington*	CVG-7	41	Mediterranean
12/11/53–19/8/54	*Tarawa*	CVG-3	32	World
4/1/54–4/8/54	*Midway*	CVG-6	5	Mediterranean
7/7/54–20/12/54	*Coral Sea*	CVG-10	31	Mediterranean
28/9/54–28/4/55	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-8	34	Mediterranean
30/11/54–18/6/55	*Randolph*	ATG-181	36	Mediterranean
27/12/54–14/7/55	*Midway*	CVG-1	35	World
5/4/55–29/9/55	*Coral Sea*	CVG-17	31	Mediterranean
4/5/55–10/12/55	*Hornet*	CVG-7	32	Western Pacific
28/5/55–22/11/55	*Intrepid*	CVG-4	33	Mediterranean
9/10/55–30/4/56	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-6	34	Mediterranean
31/10/55–16/4/56	*Bennington*	ATG-201	30	Western Pacific
4/11/55–2/8/56	*Ticonderoga*	CVG-3	39	Mediterranean
12/3/56–5/9/56	*Intrepid*	CVG-8	33	Mediterranean
13/8/56–11/2/57	*Coral Sea*	CVG-10	31	Mediterranean
7/11/56–12/12/56	*Forrestal*	CVG-1	42	Eastern Atlantic
13/11/56–12/12/56	*Saratoga*	CVG-4	?	Eastern Atlantic
15/1/57–22/7/57	*Forrestal*	CVG-1	42	Mediterranean
12/7/57–5/3/58	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	37	Mediterranean
VMJ-1 (tail code MW)				
??/10/52–??/10/52*	*Oriskany*	CVG-102	?	China overflights
10/8/55–15/3/56**	*Hancock*	CVG-12	G	Western Pacific
HEDRON-2 (tail code LL)				
26/4/53–21/10/53***	*Coral Sea*	CVG-8	?	Mediterranean

BANSHEE NIGHTFIGHTER/NUCLEAR WEAPON/ASW CARRIER DETACHMENTS

Dates	Ship	Carrier Air Group	Detachment	Type	Cruise
VC-3 (tail code NP)					
1/7/53–18/1/54	*Kearsarge*	CVG-11	C	F2H-3	Western Pacific
3/8/53–3/3/54	*Yorktown*	CVG-2	A	F2H-3	Western Pacific
14/9/53–22/4/54	*Oriskany*	CVG-19	E	F2H-3	Western Pacific
1/12/53–12/7/54	*Essex*	ATG-2	I	F2H-3	Western Pacific
3/2/54–6/8/54	*Randolph*	CVG-14	F	F2H-3	Mediterranean
11/5/54–12/12/54	*Hornet*	CVG-9	M	F2H-3	World
1/9/54–11/4/55	*Wasp*	ATG-1	H	F2H-3	World
7/10/54–12/5/55	*Kearsarge*	CVG-11	C	F2H-3	Western Pacific
3/11/54–21/6/55	*Essex*	CVG-2	A	F2H-3	Western Pacific
10/8/55–15/3/56	*Hancock*	CVG-12	G	F2H-3	Western Pacific
5/1/56–23/6/56	*Shangri-La*	ATG-3	J	F2H-3	Western Pacific
VC-4 (tail code NA)					
9/9/50–1/2/51	*Coral Sea*	CVG-17	6	F2H-2B/F4U-5N	Mediterranean
10/1/51–18/5/51	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-6	?	F2H-2N	Mediterranean
3/9/51–4/2/52	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-17	7	F2H-2N	Mediterranean
19/4/52–12/10/52	*Coral Sea*	CVG-4	6	F2H-2N/F4U-5N	Mediterranean
1/12/52–19/5/53	*Midway*	CVG-6	5	F2H-2N/F3D-2	Mediterranean
7/1/53–3/7/53	*Tarawa*	CVG-10	32	F2H-2N/F4U-5N	Mediterranean
26/4/53–29/10/ 53	*Coral Sea*	CVG-8	6	F2H-3	Mediterranean
26/4/53–4/12/53	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-4	44A/N	F2H-2B/F3D-2	Korean War
11/6/53–3/12/53	*Franklin D Roosevelt*	CVG-1	7	F2H-2B/F2H-3	Mediterranean
16/9/53–1/5/54	*Wasp*	CVG-17	38	F2H-3	World
16/9/53–21/2/54	*Bennington*	CVG-7	41	F2H-3	Mediterranean
28/9/54–22/4/55	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-8	34	F2H-4	Mediterranean
27/12/54–14/7/55	*Midway*	CVG-1	35	F2H-4	World
28/5/55–22/11/55	*Intrepid*	CVG-4	33	F2H-4	Mediterranean
24/8/55–31/3/56	*Lake Champlain*	CVG-6	34	F2H-4	Mediterranean
31/10/55–16/4/56	*Bennington*	ATG-201	30	F2H-4	Western Pacific
HEDRON-2 (tail code LL)					
26/4/53–21/10/53	*Coral Sea*	CVG-8	?	F2H-2B/F2H-2P	Mediterranean

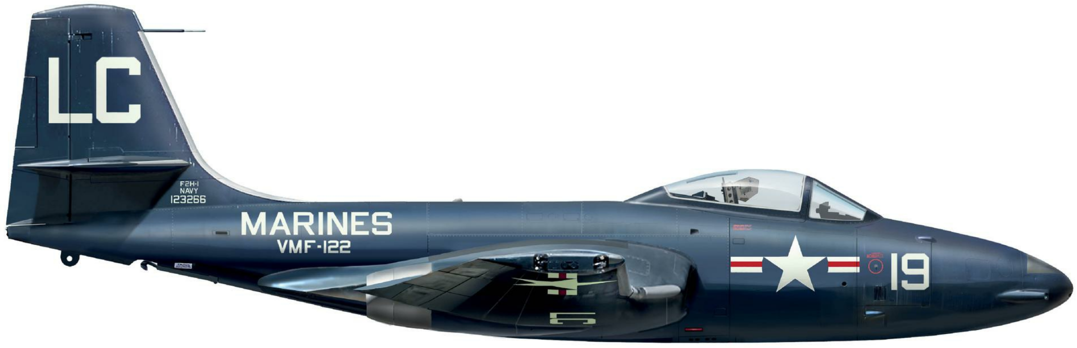
COLOUR PLATES



1

F2H-1 BuNo 122550 of VF-172, NAAS Cecil Field, Florida, December 1949

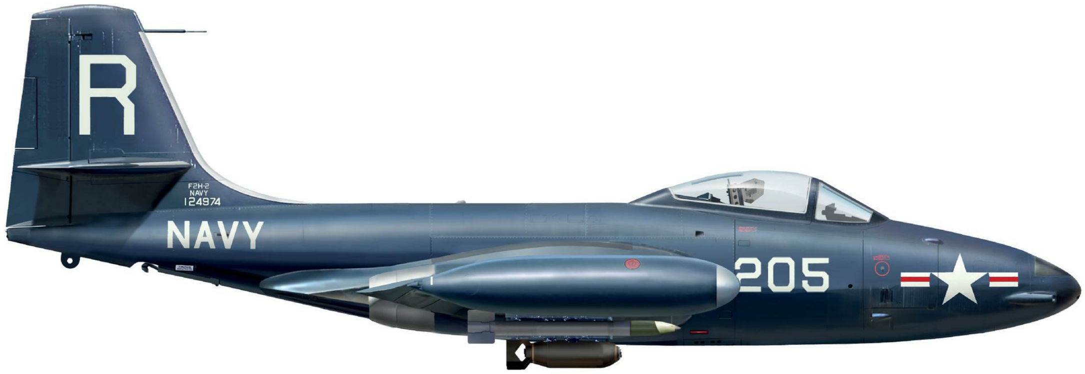
The F2H-1 equipped CVG-17's two jet fighter squadrons, VF-171 and VF-172, from late 1949. All F2H-1/2s were painted in overall Gloss Sea Blue. The national insignia was positioned on the aft fuselage on this aircraft, but its location varied widely in the fleet. The F2H-1 was exclusively a gunfighter, lacking external pylons for stores. Tip tanks were not yet a feature of the Banshee. The F2H-1 variant saw no combat over Korea.



2

F2H-2 BuNo 123266 of VMF-122, MCAS Cherry Point, North Carolina, 1950

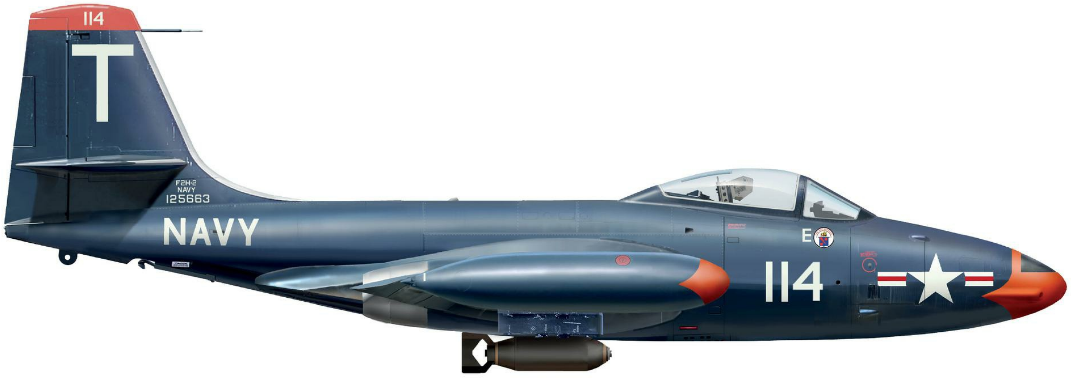
The US Marine Corps has, over the years, operated the same types of tactical carrier-based aircraft as the US Navy, for the most part. However, its use of the Banshee was relatively small compared with that of the F9F Panther, with VMF-122 being one of only five US Marine Corps fighter squadrons to be assigned the F2H. Upgrading from the FH-1 Phantom to the F2H-1, it subsequently received F2H-2s. The unit subsequently made one Mediterranean deployment with CVG-4 on board *Oriskany* between May and October 1951, after which it switched to the F9F.



3

F2H-2 BuNo 124974 of VF-172, USS *Essex* (CV-9), off Korea, August 1951

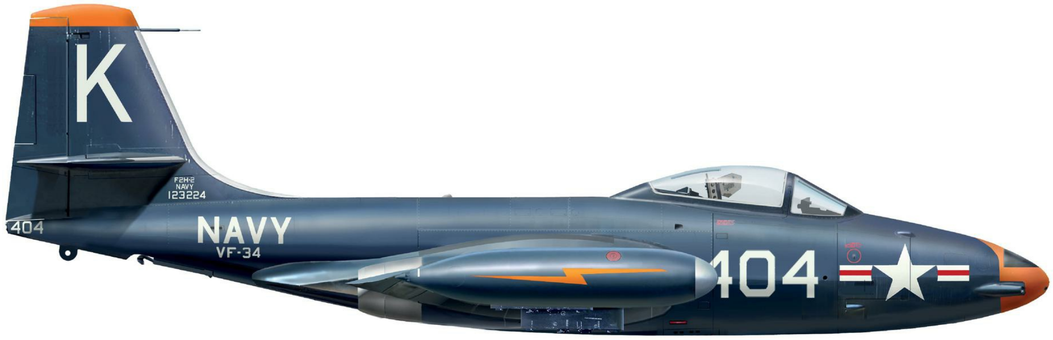
VF-172 gave the Banshee its combat debut over Korea in August 1951. The F2H-2 had eight wing stations that could carry 100- or 250-lb bombs or 5-in. HVARs, as depicted here. The two inboard pylons could carry 500-lb bombs. The Banshees routinely flew missions without tip tanks, as shown in this profile, for they were often in short supply during the Korean War. Engine nozzles and de-icing edges were not painted.



4

F2H-2 BuNo 125663 of VF-11, USS *Kearsarge* (CVA-33), off Korea, November 1952

VF-11 made the Banshee’s second fighter deployment to the Korean War. This aircraft is armed with two 500-lb bombs, the heaviest conventional armament the F2H-2 was designed to carry. It is fitted with the standard tip tanks, which could be fuelled only when the wings were extended – the Banshee’s one major quirk when it came to carrier deck handling.

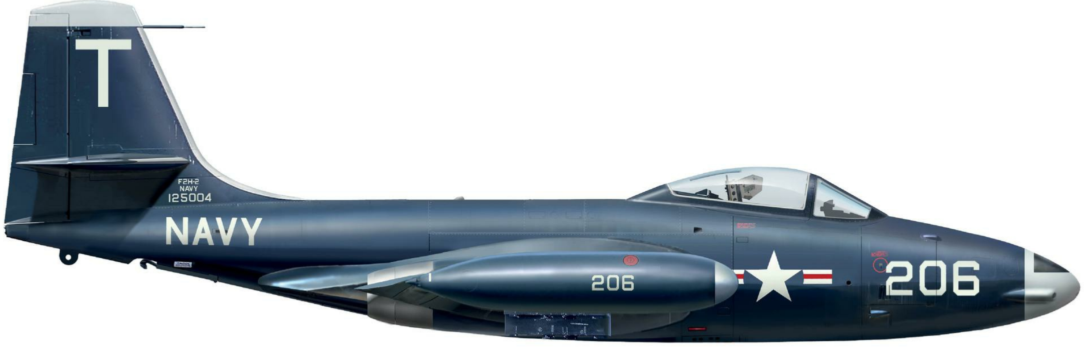


5

F2H-2 BuNo 123224 of VF-34, USS *Leyte* (CVA-32), Mediterranean, early 1953

In the early 1950s, F2H-2s equipped East Coast-based squadrons – a practice designed to simplify logistics and field certain capabilities in high-priority theatres. This profile shows the gradual introduction of squadron designations to fuselages of US Navy aircraft. VF-34 made only two deployments with the F2H-2 before being re-designated VA-

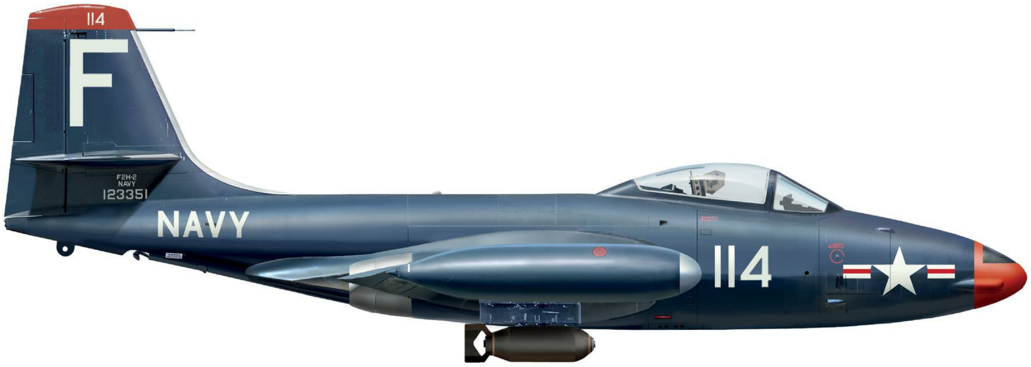
34 and upgrading, briefly, to the F7U-3 Cutlass, followed by the A4D-1 Skyhawk.



6

F2H-2 BuNo 125004 of VF-12, USS *Wasp* (CVA-18), Mediterranean, summer 1952

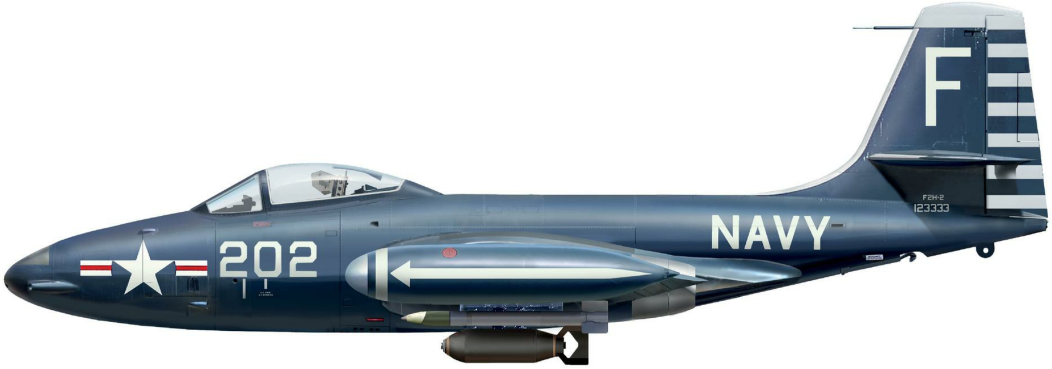
VF-12 made four deployments with the F2H-2, the first three to the Mediterranean and the fourth being a world cruise on board *Midway* – all were with CVG-1. It was during the latter deployment that VF-12 covered the evacuation of Nationalist Chinese civilians from the Dachen Islands, which were under artillery fire from Communist Chinese forces. VF-12 was re-designated VA-12 in August 1955, after which it switched to the F7U-3 Cutlass.



7

F2H-2 BuNo 123351 of VF-22, USS *Lake Champlain* (CVA-39), off Korea, June 1953

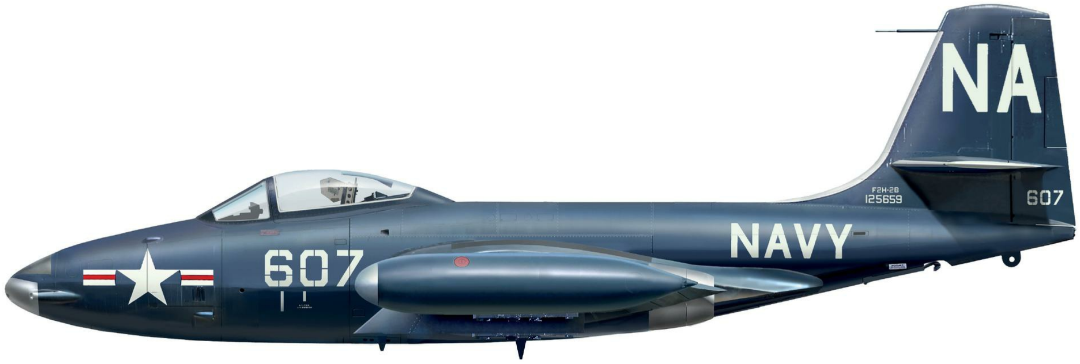
VF-22 was one of two Banshee-equipped fighter squadrons embarked in *Lake Champlain* to see action over Korea during the final two months of the conflict before the armistice came into effect. CVG-4 was the only carrier air group to deploy to the Korean War with two Banshee-equipped VF squadrons. This aircraft is armed with two 500-lb bombs. VF-22 made three deployments with F2H-2s, two of them to the Mediterranean Sea. The final one, on board *Intrepid* in 1955, was also the F2H-2's last carrier deployment with a fighter squadron. Following a single Mediterranean cruise with the F2H-4 on board *Randolph* in 1957–58, VF-22 was disestablished on 6 June 1958.



8

F2H-2 BuNo 123333 of VF-62, USS *Lake Champlain* (CVA-39), off Korea, June 1953

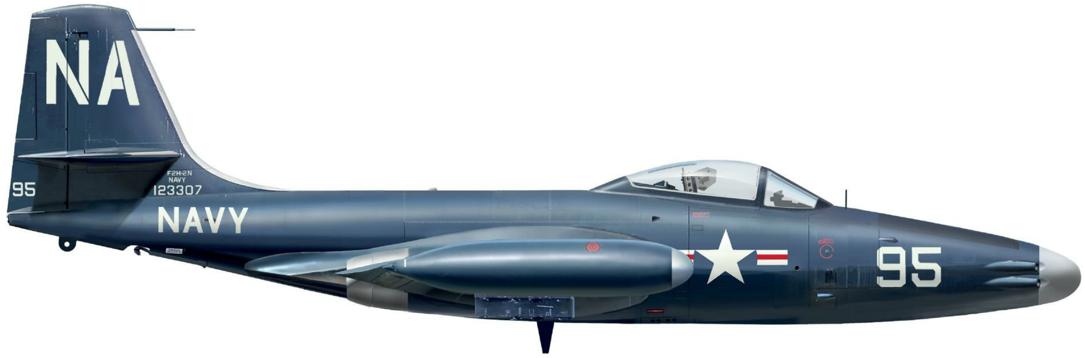
VF-62 was CVG-4's second Banshee-equipped fighter squadron embarked in *Lake Champlain* in 1953, and like VF-22, it too saw considerable action during the last two months of the Korean War. This aircraft is armed with two 500-lb bombs and four 5-in. HVARs. On the very day CVG-4 flew its first strikes in Korea (13 June 1953), VF-22's F2H-2 BuNo 123377 inadvertently fired several 20 mm cannon rounds after landing. They hit both this aircraft and BuNo 123328, also from VF-62, causing them to burst into flames. Neither jet could be saved. VF-62 made four deployments with the F2H-2 prior to being re-designated VA-106 on 1 July 1955 and switching to the F9F-8B Cougar.



9

F2H-2B BuNo 125659 of VC-4, NAS Oceana, Virginia, 18 December 1952

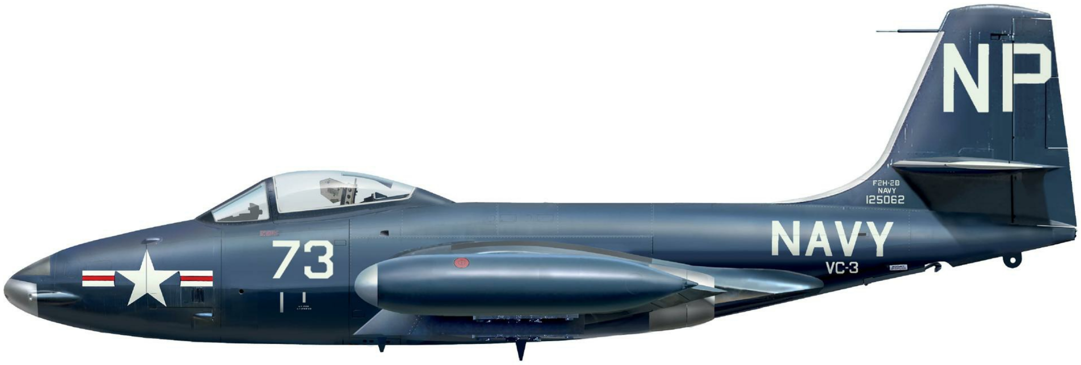
VC-4’s stable included a small number of F2H-2Bs, which were the US Navy’s first tactical jets capable of carrying nuclear weapons. This aircraft is depicted with the large weapon pylon associated with the carriage of such weapons under the port wing close to the wing root. F2H-2Bs usually deployed on board carriers as self-contained detachments manned by personnel from VC-4, although on some occasions the aircraft were maintained and flown by VF squadrons. VC-4 Detachment 44 deployed F2H-2Bs to the Korean War theatre in mid-1953 with CVG-4 on board *Lake Champlain*, although it was shore-based at NAS Atsugi throughout the ship’s time with TF 77.



10

F2H-2N BuNo 123307 of VC-4, NAS Oceana, Virginia, early 1950s

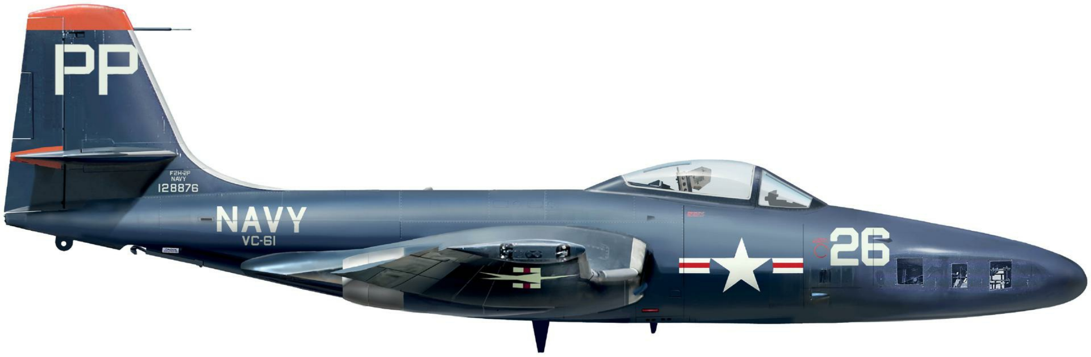
VC-4 also flew the F2H-2N nightfighter, which soon began to replace the F4U-5N in carrier air groups. The F2H-2N was the US Navy’s first successful carrier-based radar-equipped jet, as the radar-equipped F3D-2 that preceded it proved to be unsuitable for carrier operations and was relegated to flying from shore bases. Fitted with the nose-mounted APS-30 radar, the F2H-2N was 27 inches longer than the F2H-2B. Because of the radar, the arrangement of the four 20 mm cannon in the nose differed to the F2H-2. The 14 F2H-2Ns built paved the way for the F2H-3/4, which became the standard all-weather fighters for VF squadrons. Sister-squadron VC-3 never operated F2N-2Ns. Transferred to VF-82 in 1953, BuNo 123307 was lost on 16 August 1954 when it crashed into the sea shortly after being launched from *Lake Champlain* during work-ups off the Virginia coast.



11

F2H-2B BuNo 125062 of VC-3, Itazuke Air Base, Japan, early 1950s

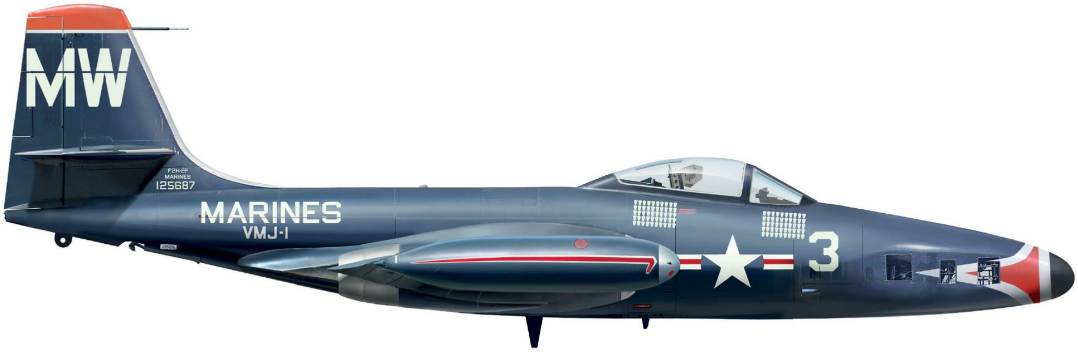
VC-3 was the Pacific Fleet squadron that operated the F2H-2B, this variant giving carrier air groups a flightdeck-friendly nuclear weapons capability. VC-3 deployed F2H-2Bs to Japan, but unlike VC-4, there are no records to indicate the unit operated the type from aircraft carriers. Note the large weapon pylon under the port wing close to the wing root. The 27 F2H-2Bs built served until succeeded by nuclear-capable F2H-3/4s.



12

F2H-2P BuNo 128876 of VC-61 Detachment H, USS *Boxer* (CVA-21), off Korea, May 1953

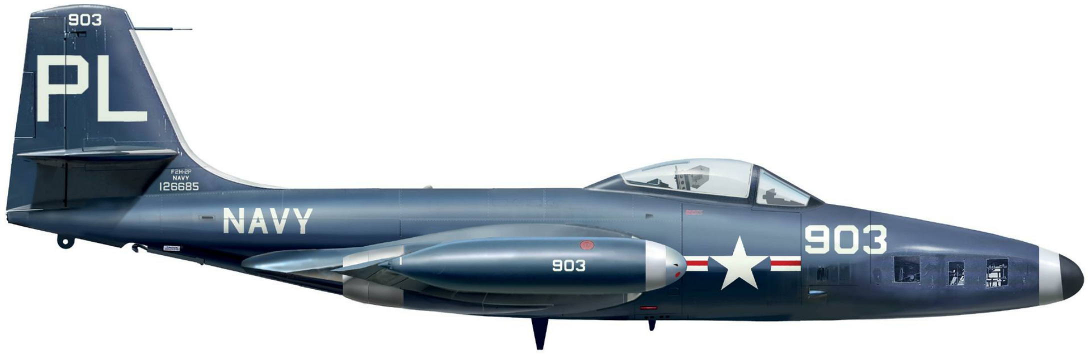
VC-61 was the Pacific Fleet squadron that supplied photo-reconnaissance aircraft detachments to carriers, sending eight Banshee-equipped detachments to the Korean War from June 1951 – BuNo 128876 was assigned to Det H, which was the only detachment to deploy twice to the conflict. The first few detachments operated a mix of F2H-2Ps and F9F-2Ps, but the increasing numbers and superiority of the former led to all-Banshee detachments. F2H-2Ps frequently flew missions over Korea without tip tanks, the jets also lacking armament. Three cameras were carried in the nose, and they shot out of nine ports – three on either side of the fuselage and three on the underside of the nose.



13

F2H-2P BuNo 125687 of VMJ-1, Pohang (K-3), South Korea, summer 1953

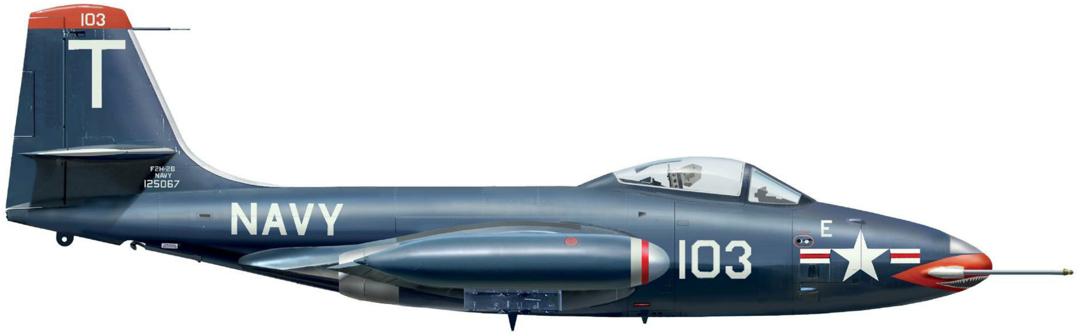
VMJ-1 was a photo-reconnaissance squadron, and the only US Marine Corps unit to operate the Banshee in the Korean War theatre. Its F2H-2Ps were decorated more than most Banshees during the conflict, boasting much colour and impressive mission tallies. The squadron saw extensive action over North Korea following its formation at Pohang on 25 February 1952, VMJ-1 Banshees also undertaking missions over China and the Soviet Union.



14

F2H-2P BuNo 126685 of VC-62 Detachment 31, USS *Coral Sea* (CVA-43), Mediterranean, November 1954

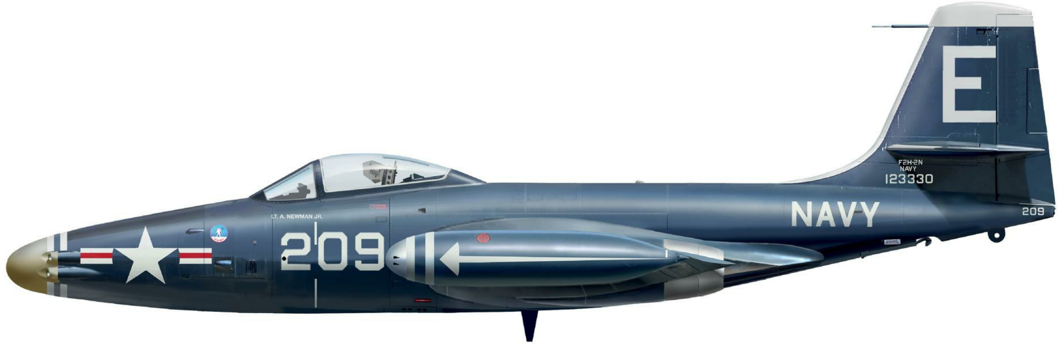
VC-62 was the Atlantic Fleet squadron that supplied photo-reconnaissance aircraft detachments to carriers. Only one of the unit's Banshee detachments reached the Korean War, Detachment 44 on board *Lake Champlain* in 1953. The photo-reconnaissance versions of the F2H-2 served long after the fighter variants had been retired from the fleet, sharing flightdecks with F2H-3/4s until replaced by F9F-8Ps. Detachment 31, to whom BuNo 126685 was assigned in 1954 as part of CVG-10, undertook three Mediterranean deployments with F2H-2P between July 1954 and February 1957.



15

F2H-2B BuNo 125067 of VF-101, USS *Midway* (CVA-41), western Pacific, June 1955

Some nuclear-capable F2H-2Bs served with a handful of regular VF squadrons, such as VF-101. The F2H-2B was the first Banshee variant to be fitted with an aerial refuelling capability, which became a fleet requirement for tactical jets in the mid-1950s. The refuelling probe took the place of the upper/outboard starboard 20 mm cannon. The refuelling capability also added range to the aircraft, which gave greater reach to its nuclear strike capability.

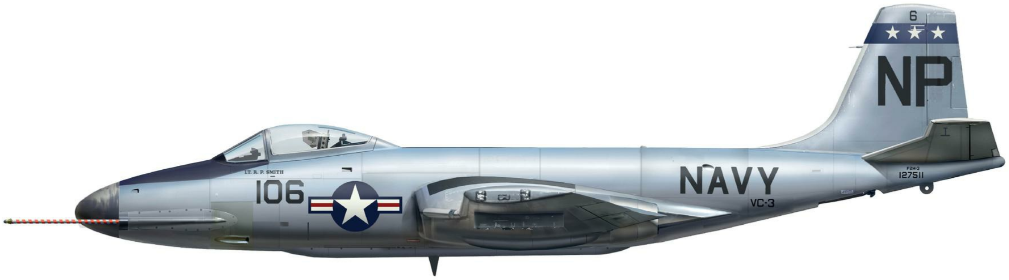


16

F2H-2N BuNo 123330 of VF-82, USS *Lake Champlain* (CVA-39), Mediterranean, early 1954

Like the F2H-2B, some F2H-2Ns also deployed with F2H-2-equipped VF squadrons. VF-82 was one such unit, operating all three types in 1953–54. With this allocation, VF-82 deployed to the Mediterranean with CVG-8 on board *Lake Champlain* in 1954–55. The remaining fighter squadrons in the carrier air group were equipped with F9F-5s

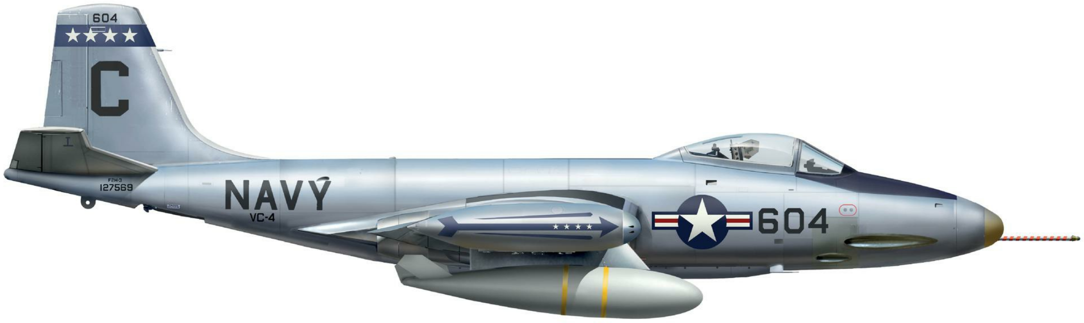
(VF-84) and F9F-6s (VF-61), while VC-4 Detachment 34 operated the new night/all-weather-capable F2H-4.



17

F2H-3 BuNo 127511 of VC-3, NAS Moffett Field, California, 1955

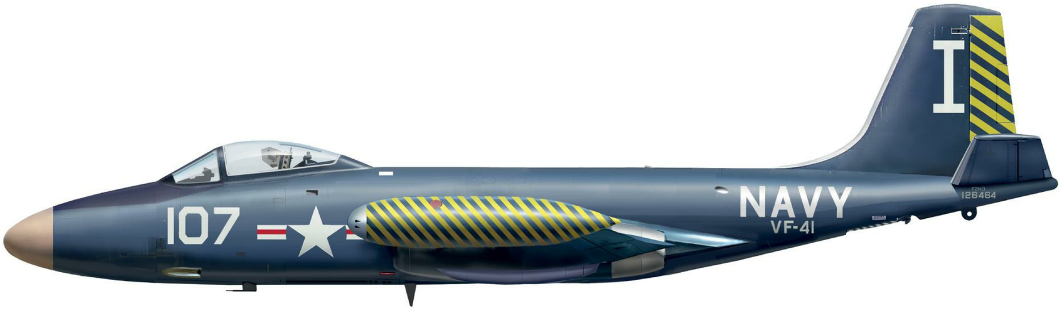
The F2H-3 combined the fighter, nightfighter and nuclear strike missions in one airframe, enabling replacement of the F2H-2/2B/2N. The F2H-3 was longer, allowing for more internal fuel, and had a revised empennage configuration. This F2H-3 has been modified with a ventral faring that housed the fuel plumbing that enabled fuel from the refuelling probe to reach the fuselage tanks. In direct contrast to the refuelling probe fitted to the starboard side of the F2H-2B, the F2H-3's probe replaced the port-side upper 20 mm gun, with which it was interchangeable. VC-3 detachments made 11 deployments with F2H-3s. BuNo 127511's natural metal finish was a feature of many US Navy aircraft in the mid-1950s, although it eventually gave way to the Non-Specular Light Gull Gray over Gloss Insignia White that was adopted from February 1955 in order to control airframe corrosion.



18

F2H-4 BuNo 127569 of VC-4 Detachment 30, USS *Lake Champlain* (CVA-39), western Pacific, late 1955

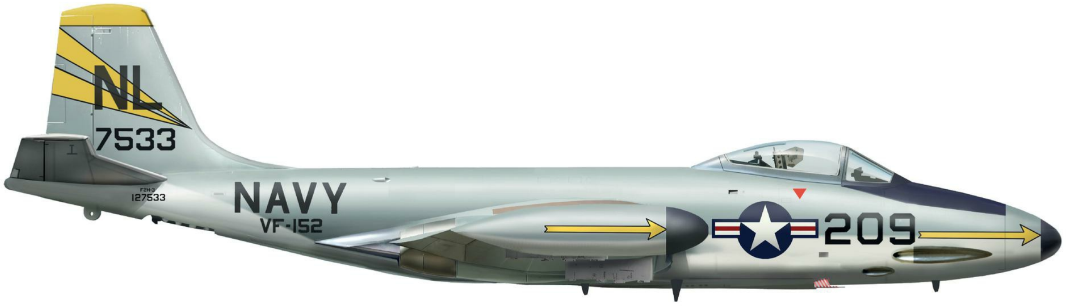
The F2H-3/4 could be fitted with a large bomb pylon under the starboard wing root – the opposite location to how it was fitted to the F2H-2B. The Mk 7 nuclear weapon, shown in this profile, and the smaller Mk 8 could be carried by the F2H-3/4. This example is also equipped with the refuelling package. In the nuclear strike role, the Banshees had the mission of attacking enemy air defence airfields to clear the way for bombers to get through to major targets.



19

F2H-3 BuNo 126464 of VF-41, USS *Forrestal* (CVA-59), Caribbean, February 1956

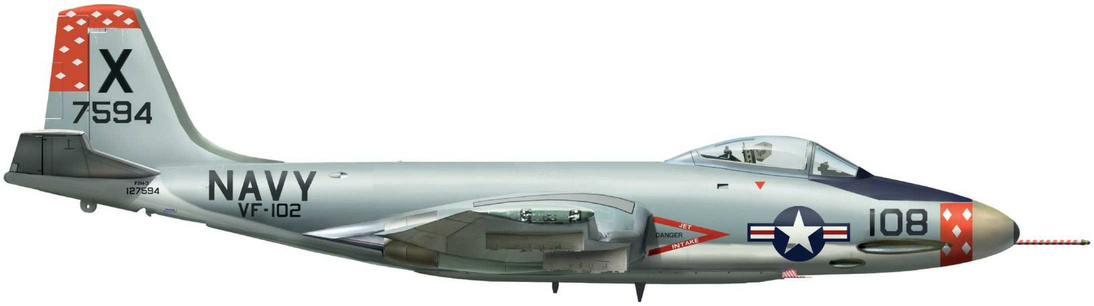
Some early F2H-3s were delivered in the overall Gloss Sea Blue scheme depicted here. This Banshee variant also featured the early horizontal stabiliser without the leading-edge fillets that were subsequently retrofitted to improve stability. VF-41 embarked in *Forrestal* for the carrier's brief shakedown cruise off the Virginia Capes and to the Caribbean in early 1956. The radomes of F2H-3/4s were variously black, tan or part of the Non-Specular Light Gull Gray over Gloss Insignia White scheme. Aside from this brief stint on board *Forrestal*, the 'Black Aces' made two operational deployments with 'Big Banjos' prior to upgrading to the F3H Demon in 1958. BuNo 126464 was sold to the RCN in August 1957, and it served with the Canadians until struck off charge in December 1962. The aircraft is currently part of the Canadian National Aeronautical Collection in Ottawa, Ontario.



20

F2H-3 BuNo 127533 of VF-152, NAS Moffett Field, California, 1957

When VF-152 deployed on a WestPac with the F2H-3 on board *Wasp* in 1956, its jets wore CVG-15's 'H' tail code. Shortly after the unit's return to Moffett Field in October of that year, the US Navy implemented a system of two-letter tail codes, with CVG-15 being assigned 'NL'. By the time VF-152 deployed to the western Pacific again on board *Hornet* during the first week of January 1958, it had been transferred to ATG-4, whose tail code was 'ND'. The squadron was re-designated VA-152 on 1 August 1958, and it deployed as such with ATG-4 on board *Bennington* that same month. In February 1959, several weeks after returning from its fourth WestPac with Banshees, the units transitioned from F2H-3s to propeller-driven AD-6 Skyraiders.

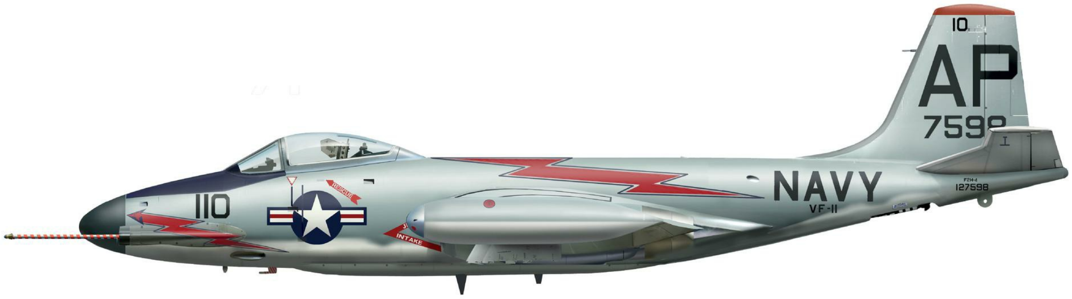


21

F2H-4 BuNo 127594 of VF-102, USS *Randolph* (CVA-15), Mediterranean, early 1957

A new squadron in 1955, the 'Diamondbacks' of VF-102 took the F2H-4 on its first deployment, to the Mediterranean, in 1956–57 with ATG-

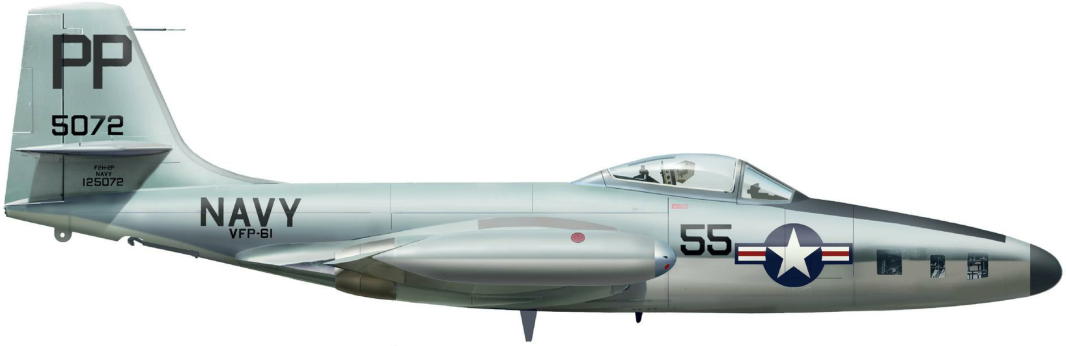
202 on board USS *Randolph*. It would prove to be the unit's only deployment with Banshees, for the 'Diamondbacks' upgraded to the F4D-1 Skyray in 1957 and embarked in *Forrestal* with CVG-10 for VF-102's second Mediterranean cruise in 1958–59. BuNo 127594 features jet intake warning markings, which slowly appeared on all US Navy jets from the mid-1950s.



22

F2H-4 BuNo 127598 of VF-11, USS *Essex* (CVA-9), Mediterranean, March 1958

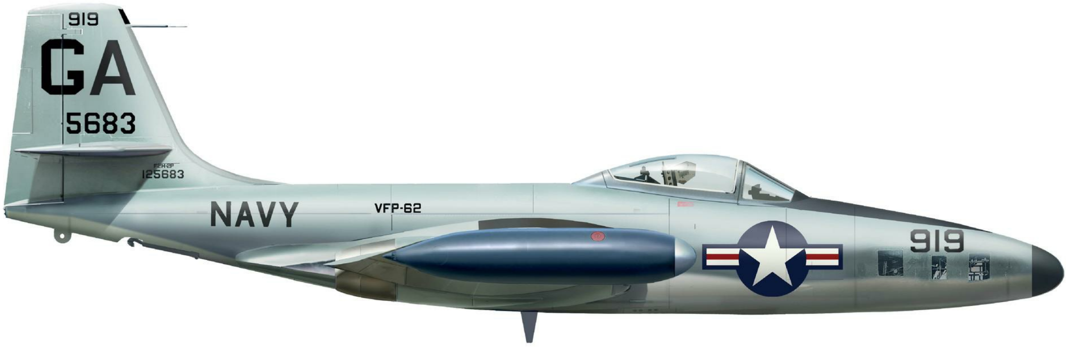
VF-11 deployed with F2H-4s on a round-the-world cruise in 1958 on board *Essex*, flying cover for the US intervention into Lebanon and guarding Taiwan during the Quemoy-Matsu crisis. The institution of two-letter tail codes was in place by the time of this deployment, with VF-11 providing ATG-201 with its all-weather fighter coverage while the FJ-3Ms of VF-62 undertook day-fighter missions. BuNo 127598 had also participated in VF-11's Mediterranean deployment on board *Coral Sea* in 1956–57, when the unit was assigned to CVG-10.



23

F2H-2P BuNo 125072 of VFP-61 Detachment I, USS *Hancock* (CVA-19), western Pacific, 1957

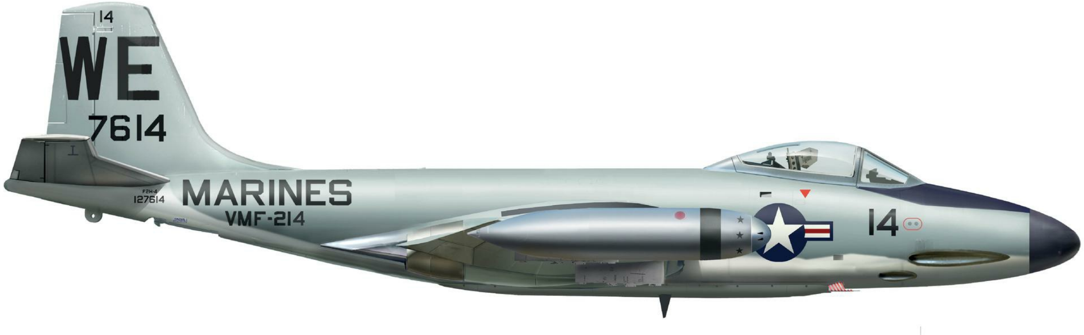
The F2H-2P was never succeeded by a photo-reconnaissance version of the F2H-3/4, which meant it remained in service long after the fighter F2H-2s had been withdrawn from frontline service. VC-61/VFP-61 provided F2H-2P detachments for Pacific Fleet carrier air groups from June 1951 through to April 1958. The detachments typically retained their PP tail code when deployed. Assigned to CVG-9, VFP-61 Detachment M made the unit's final F2H-2P deployment in 1957–58 on board *Ticonderoga*. The photo-Banshees were replaced by F9F-8P Cougars.



24

F2H-2P BuNo 125683 of VFP-62, USS *Saratoga* (CVA-60), eastern Atlantic, November 1956

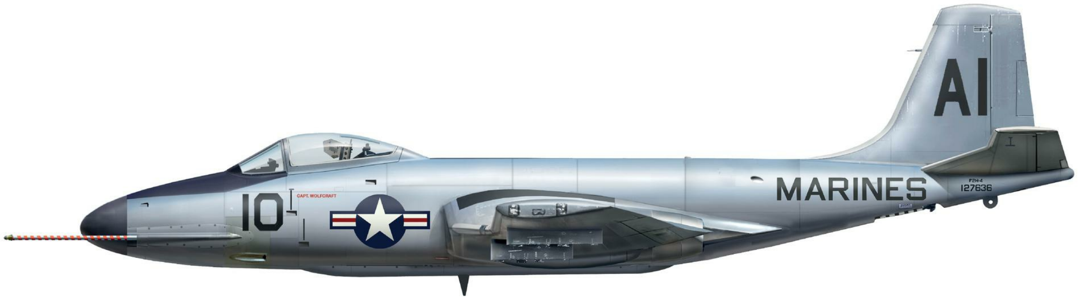
VC-62/VFP-62 provided F2H-2P detachments to Atlantic Fleet carrier air groups from September 1951 through to March 1958. A VFP-62 detachment was on board *Saratoga* when the carrier's shakedown cruise was interrupted and the vessel was sent to the eastern Atlantic in response to the Suez Crisis. VFP-62 aircraft sometimes wore the tail codes of the carrier air groups to which they were assigned, although this aircraft retained VFP-62's newly-applied 'GA' codes during its brief embark in *Saratoga* with CVG-4. VFP-62 Detachment 37 made the squadron's last deployment with F2H-2Ps in 1957–58, when it operated in the Mediterranean from *Franklin D Roosevelt* as part of CVG-17. F9F-8Ps subsequently replaced the photo-Banshees.



25

F2H-4 BuNo 127614 of VMF-214, MCAS Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, March 1956

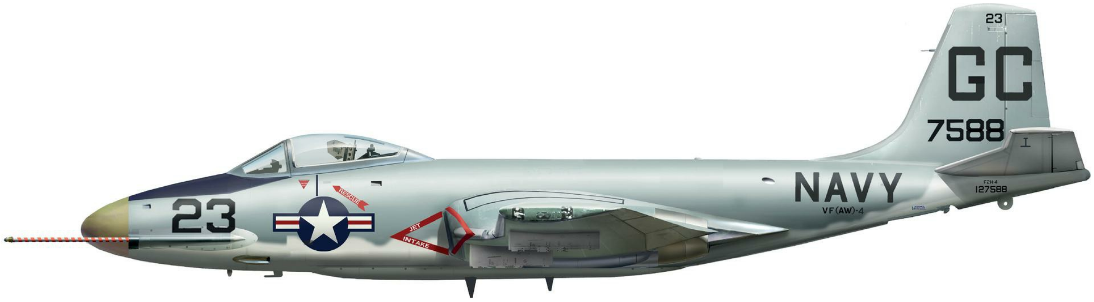
VMF-214 was one of only five US Marine Corps fighter squadrons to operate the Banshee, the ‘Black Sheep’ giving up their F9F-2 Panthers for F2H-4s in 1953. The squadron, re-designated VMF(AW)-214, deployed on board *Hancock* in 1957 with ATG-2 as one of its three fighter squadrons – the unit fulfilled the all-weather fighter and nuclear delivery roles. The ‘Black Sheep’ traded their F2H-4s for FJ-4B Furies shortly after completing their single carrier deployment in Banshees. BuNo 127614 was transferred to NAS North Island-based VAW-11 following its service with the US Marine Corps, and the jet was destroyed in a fatal accident on 22 February 1959 when Lt James F Wyley flew into high ground in the Santa Cruz Mountains, in California, in poor weather.



26

F2H-4 BuNo 127636 of VMF(N)-533, MCAS Cherry Point, South Carolina, September 1955

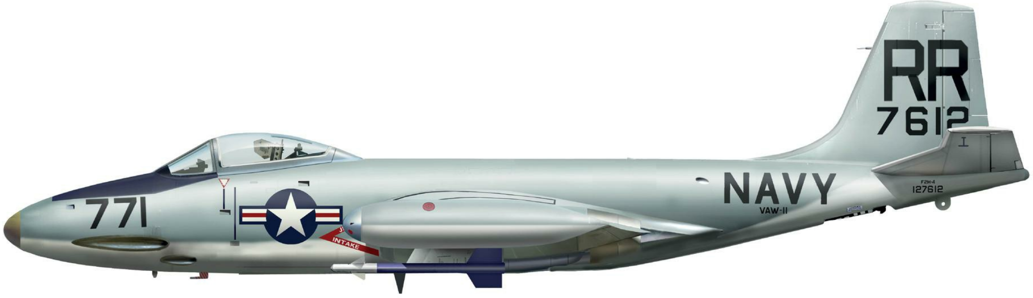
VMF(N)-533 traded its F7F-3N Tigercat nightfighters for F2H-4s in May 1953, and it subsequently undertook a solitary Mediterranean deployment with the aircraft as part of ATG-182 embarked in *Lake Champlain* between January and July 1957. During the course of the cruise the squadron was re-designated VMF(AW)-533, and in September 1957 it became VMA-533 and transitioned to the F9F Cougar.



27

F2H-4 BuNo 127588 of VF(AW)-4, NAS Patuxent River, Maryland, August 1958

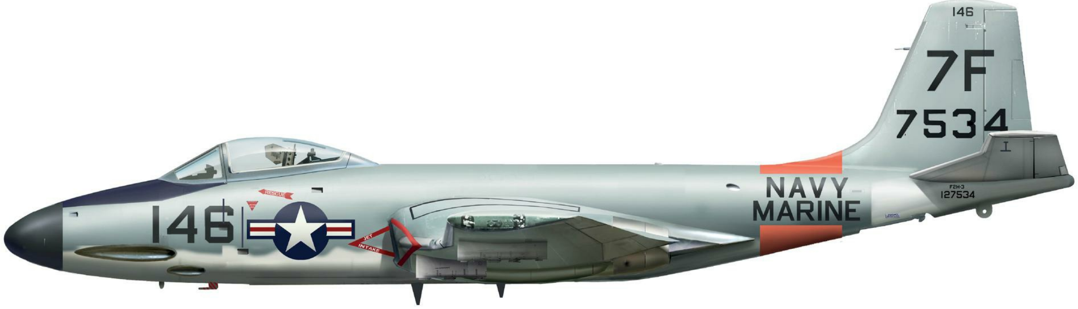
VC-4 detachments made five deployments with F2H-4s before the squadron was re-designated VF(AW)-4 on 2 July 1956. Although records are incomplete, it appears that the unit had a large number of F2H-4s on hand after the re-designation but that all detachments from April 1956 onward with Atlantic Fleet ASW carriers were made by AD-5/5N Skyraiders. The unit was disestablished on 31 August 1959.



28

F2H-4 BuNo 127612 of VAW-11, NAS North Island, California, 1959

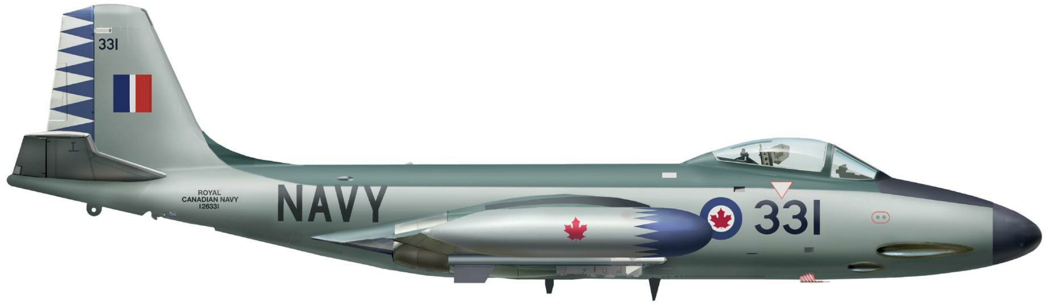
Perhaps the most unusual assignment of the Banshee was to VAW-11, a squadron that operated unarmed AD-5W Skyraider and WF-1 Tracer airborne early warning aircraft on both fleet and ASW carriers. The F2H-4s assigned to VAW-11 were equipped with two rails to fire Sidewinder heat-seeking air-to-air missiles, the squadron’s Banshees being tasked with providing fighter protection for the ASW carriers. BuNo 127612 was assigned to VAW-11’s Detachment P when it embarked in *Hornet* for a WestPac in 1959, thus making the squadron the last fleet unit to operate the Banshee from a carrier.



29

F2H-3 BuNo 127534 of the Naval Air Reserve Training Unit, Oakland, California, 1960

As the F2H-3/4 Banshees were withdrawn from fleet service, some were transferred to reserve units in Oakland, California, and Norfolk, Virginia. VF-876 and VF-879 at Oakland operated Banshees from May 1958 until March 1961. The reserve units conducted routine training, but never deployed with their Banshees. When both squadrons made the transition to the A4D-1 Skyhawk, it signalled the end of the Naval Air Reserve’s use of the Banshee. These aircraft had the Navy/Marine markings with the international orange band typical of reserve units of the time.



30

F2H-3 BuNo 126331 of VF-870, RCNAS Shearwater, Nova Scotia, 1958

VF-870 was one of three RCN squadrons to fly the F2H-3, with Canada being the only foreign operator of the Banshee (from 1955 to 1962). These aircraft were armed with Sidewinder missiles in addition to general-purpose bombs and rockets. Embarked in *Bonaventure*, Canadian Banshees were the last F2Hs to fly from aircraft carriers. All RCN Banshees were painted in dark sea grey on their uppersurfaces and light sea grey on their undersides. This aircraft has tip tanks, which were a rare sight in RCN service as the aircraft could not fit in *Bonaventure*'s hangar bay with its wings folded if they were installed. BuNo 126331 was struck off charge in May 1961 and later destroyed in fire training.

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Jim Laurier is a native of New England, growing up in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. He has been drawing since he could hold a pencil, and throughout his life he has worked in many mediums creating artwork on a variety of subjects. He has contributed thousands of artworks to the Osprey Aviation list since 2000, specialising in aircraft from the Korean and Vietnam Wars.

Gareth Hector is a digital artist of international standing as well as an aviation history enthusiast. Gareth completed the cover artwork for this title. He lives in Perthshire, Scotland.

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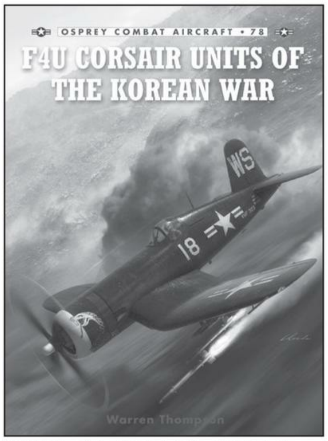
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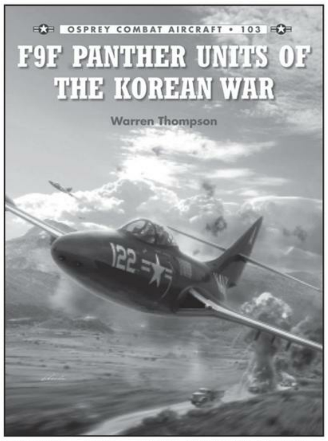
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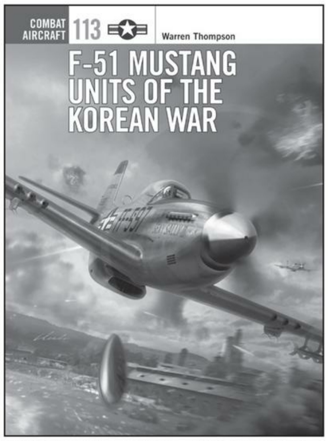
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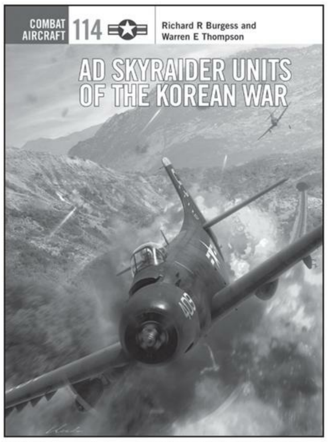
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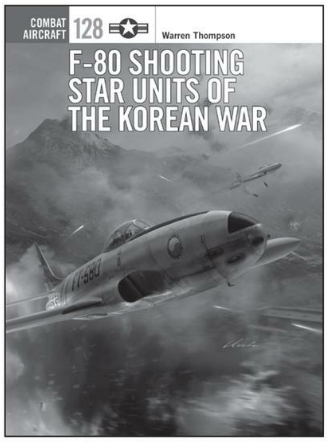
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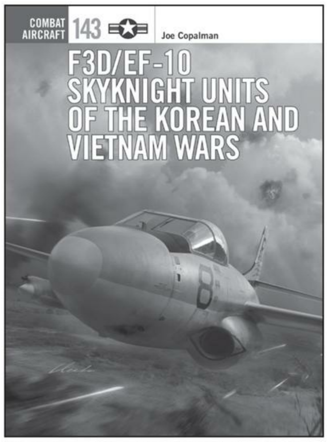
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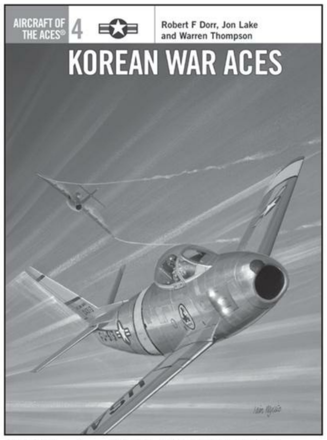
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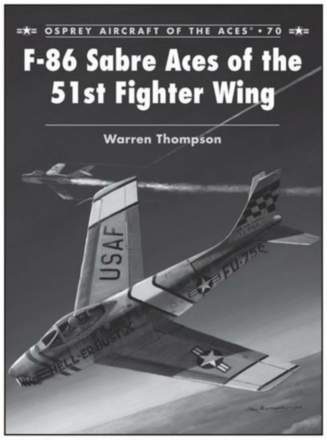
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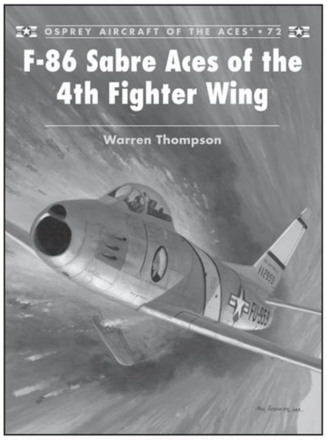
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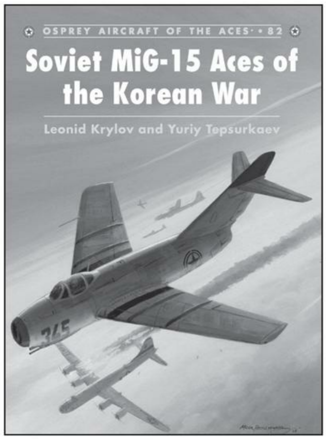
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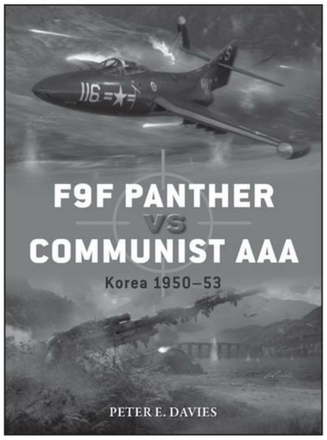
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Front Cover

Two VF-11 F2H-2 Banshees attack a North Korean railway line with 5-in. HVARs while flying an armed reconnaissance mission during the autumn of 1952. Armed reconnaissance and flak suppression comprised the most numerous missions flown by F2H-2 Banshees during the Korean War. VF-11 ‘Red Rippers’ deployed with CVG-101 on board USS *Kearsarge* (CV-33), although its aircraft retained the tail code ‘T’ instead of the carrier air group’s assigned tail code, ‘A’. The ‘Red Rippers’ were led by Cdr Denny P Phillips until he was killed in action on 23 January 1953 when his Banshee was shot down near Wonsan during an armed reconnaissance mission (*Cover artwork by Gareth Hector*)

TITLE PAGE

Two F2H-2Ps (BuNos 128876 and 128879) from VC-61 Detachment H are shown returning to *Boxer* from a mission over Korea on 19 May 1953. Banshees often flew without tip tanks, as their ability to cruise on one engine gave the aircraft an excellent range (*Steve Ginter Collection*)